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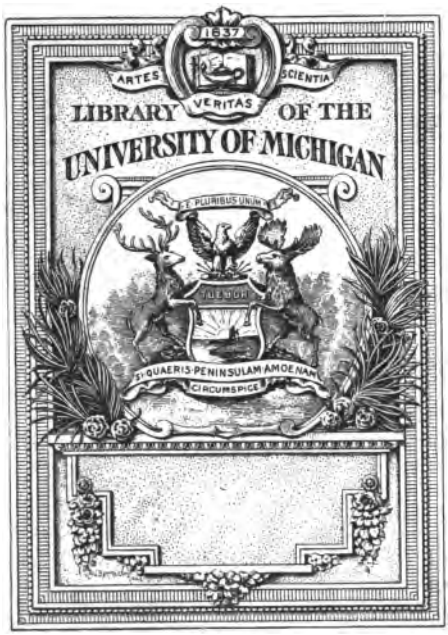

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THE CHRONICLES OF RHODA

THE CHRONICLES OF RUFUS

BY

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BOSTON

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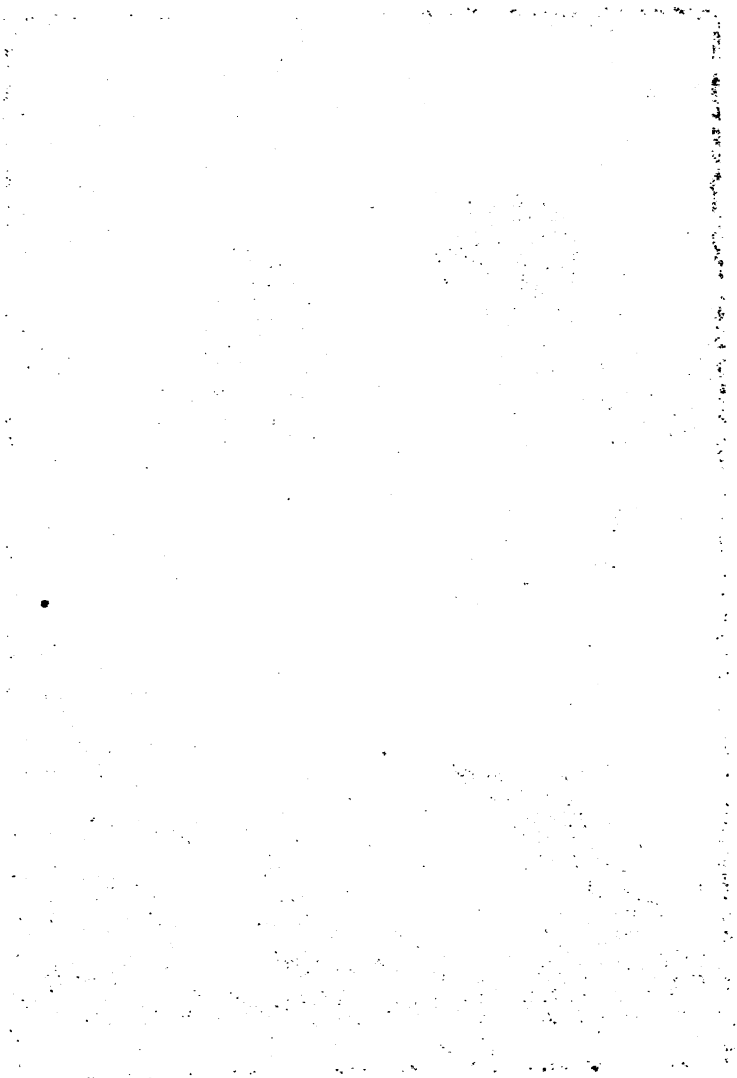

THE CHRONICLES OF RHODA

BY

FLORENCE TINSLEY COX

ILLUSTRATED BY

JESSIE WILLCOX SMITH

"O the radiant light that girdled
Field and forest, land and sea,
When we all were young together,
And the world was new to me."

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TO THE MEMORY

OF

MY FATHER AND MY MOTHER

207429

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I

A DETHRONED QUEEN

I

A DETHRONED QUEEN

"YOUR name is Rhoda," grandmother said, with the catechism open in her hand. "Rhoda. Rhoda. It's quite easy to say."

"Ain't I the little pig that went to market?" I asked, anxiously, gazing up from her lap into her eyes, over which she wore glass things like covers. "And ain't I Baby Bunting?" I continued, with the memory of a famous hunt stealing over me.

"Once you were," grandmother answered, soberly. "Now you are Rhoda."

I liked to sit in grandmother's lap. She had such a soft silk lap, and in her pocket-hole there was a box which held peppermint drops. She never gave them

to anybody but just me, when I was good, and if her arms were thin and fragile under the soft silk, she knew how to hold a little girl in a most comfortable fashion. Her white hair rippled down low at the sides, concealing her ears, but her ears were there for I had run my fingers up to see. She wore a lovely lace collar, and a breastpin with a picture on it, and when she walked the charms on her watch-chain clinked in a musical way. Grandmother was beautiful, and every one said that I looked just like grandmother. That was very nice, but puzzling, for my hair was golden, and my eyes were uncovered, and where grandmother had her wrinkles I had only a soft pink cheek.

I never sat very long on grandmother's lap. It was a function that meant catechism or extreme repentance, and then, also, I was too popular for one person to have me always. The family handed

me around very much like refreshments. Now I would be with mother, and now with father, and now with Auntie May, who did not live at our house, but would run in on her way to school to pat my head. They were all so fond of me that it was quite gratifying.

"Where is Rhoda?" father would ask the very first thing when he came into the house at night, and I would sit up for him, holding on tightly to my chair for fear that they would put me to bed before he came.

Then we would have a little talk together, up in a corner by ourselves. He was my confidant, and was more on a level with me than other people. I had an idea that he would give me anything, quite irrespective of goodness or badness, for when I was naughty he never appeared to think any the worse of me, although the rest of the family might be bowed down with the sense of my

moral shortcomings. He was my champion, and in the early twilight I had many stories to tell him, not always of the strictest veracity.

"And so I runned away, far, far away, and I only came home just now," I invented, in an airy manner.

"Did you see any one on the road?" he asked, with sudden interest.

He was aware of my love of a romance.

"There was a little old woman in a red cloak with a red pepper in her mouth," I answered, peeping up in his face with wide, truthful eyes.

"Mother Hubbard!" my father cried, clapping his hands like a boy. "Mother Hubbard! But where was her dog?"

"Her dog was behind, and he had a red pepper in his mouth," I added, hastily.

"I wonder what they were going to do with them," my father said, luring me on.

"Don't you know, father?" I cried, delighted.

"No, I can't think."

"Pies! She was going to make pies out of them! Pretty red pepper pies!"

"Sure enough!" my father said, much surprised. "I never thought of that. How I wish that I'd been along!"

The little old lady in the silk dress used to quake when I said these things. That was one of the reasons why she was teaching me my catechism at such an early age, and I could repeat some pretty hymns, too, which helped to comfort her. Always, no matter how extravagant the tale might be, she made her protest. She meant that, at least, there should be one strong hand to guide the child on the right road.

"That is not really so, Rhoda," she declared, in a severe voice. "You did not see an old woman with a red pepper in her mouth."

I looked at her with a pout.

"Well, I did see an old woman in a red cloak, grandma."

"No, you did n't see an old woman at all. Child, you have not been out of the house to-day!"

"I saw a dog with a red pepper in his mouth," I said, meekly.

"No, you did not even see a dog."

"Well, I saw my own red pepper!" I cried, breaking into sudden tears, for this was my last stronghold, and if the pepper was taken away all my charming fairy tale was gone.

"It 's not a question of truth or untruth," my father said, tossing his head back as if he were displeased. "It was merely a story of adventure. Pray did you never meet any heroic beasts yourself in your own day?"

I opened one wet eye, and stole a cautious glance at grandmother.

"Never, Robert, never!"

I began to cry again harder than before.

Then my father took me in his arms, and carried me upstairs to my mother.

"Grandmother has been making her tell the truth," he said, ruefully. "She has n't any sympathy with Rhoda's imagination."

So even in those early days I found that I had an imagination, just as I had a chair with long legs, and a blue plate, and a silver mug. It was a sleeping imagination as yet, for though I had a beautiful blue plate with a blue bridge over a blue and white stream, I never imagined until after years that those tiny figures on the bridge were lovers running away from a cruel parent. Then the bridge was the spot beyond which the gravy must not flow. When it swept over the boundary which I marked for it, I pounded the table with

impotent rage, and would eat no more dinner.

"If she were a child of mine," grandmother said, sternly, "she should eat her dinner. It is simply preposterous that her temper should be allowed to go unchecked. What will she be when she grows up!"

"I don't think that Rhoda has a bad temper," my mother replied, plaintively. "It 's only that she 's the soul of order."

My mother always discovered an excuse that fitted my case, and that critical grandparent of mine found the ground swept from beneath her feet. I was the soul of order. She had seen me herself with my large basketful of toys wending wearily about the house. It was a large basket, a beautiful yellow one with a red handle, and when I began to play my things came out of it, and when I was through playing they went into the yellow basket again.

I had a rag doll of a pleasing appearance, named Arabella, and a black woolly creature, which to the eye of affection was a dog, and some of the small bits of carved wood with which a wooden Noah intended to replenish his earth. I played the most delightful games with these toys, and my mother played with me like another small child.

It was with her that I lived most of my life. We were together, not only during the day, but also at night, for when I woke up hours after I had been put in my crib, she was always sitting in the lamplight, sewing or reading, or else quietly watching the fire on the hearth. There was a cheerful glitter from the brass andirons and fender, and on a shelf above a silver candle-stick with crystal pendants threw out rosy lights. I did not know any of these wonderful things by name, but I vaguely enjoyed their engaging sparkle, and

would lie feeling very safe and warm, with my eyes on the central figure which came and went, now large and mother-like, now lost in the misty depths of slumber.

Strong as was my feeling of proprietorship in that crib, however, there came a dreadful night when I awoke to find myself lost. I was in a new bed. I was in grandmother's big bed, where there was a faint smell of lavender which I liked without knowing why. Grandmother herself had me in her arms and was soothing me.

"Hush-a-by, baby," she said, in quite a new tone, somewhat like a grandmother, but more like an angel. "Hush-a-by, baby, in the treetop."

I sat up and looked about for the shining fender. It was gone! The fire was gone, and my mother was gone!

"I want my mother," I said, sternly.

"Rhoda can't have mother now.

Rhoda must stay with grandma," the dulcet voice went on. "Grandma's own little Rhoda!"

"But I want my mother," I cried, all the sternness breaking into sobs.

Grandmother was evidently alarmed. She rocked me softly, she gave me hurried sips of water, and, at last, she emptied the peppermint drops, not one by one as heretofore, but, lavishly, in dozens, into my hand. I felt a little more comfortable. The fender was a pretty thing to watch, but peppermint drops were peppermint drops. I went to sleep in my grandmother's arms quite calmly, while with tender touches she dried my eyes and smoothed my hair.

"Bless the child!" I heard her say, in the pause between dreams.

It was rather a shock, perhaps, to wake up in that big bed next morning and be dressed by grandmother. She was very awkward at it, as if she had

forgotten how small garments were constructed, and how hard it was for arms to go into sleeves. I was preternaturally good, but even when I slipped my hand into hers to go downstairs I was meaning to desert her when mother came into sight.

We went down to breakfast, very clean and neat, with short, sober steps that suited both our gaits. Father came hurrying to meet us and was quite overjoyed to see me; but, although I searched in all the closets and behind the doors, there was no mother in any of the rooms. When no one was looking at me I started upstairs to hunt for her. Grandmother called me back in that old tone which must be obeyed, which had the ring of authority and catechism in it.

"Stay here, Rhoda," she said, decisively. "You are not to go out of this room."

Then with cautious steps she mounted

up herself, passing into the forbidden regions, and father and I were all that were left of the circle about the table, which was usually so gay with talk and merriment. To my eyes father had a look as if he, too, were frightened.

"Never mind, father," I said, eagerly. "Rhoda won't run away."

He took me up with rather an apologetic laugh.

"Little daughter," he said, in a tender way, "did I ever tell you about the big bird?"

"No, father," I answered, quickly.

"Not about the time when it brought me Rhoda?"

I stared at him with delighted eyes. Evidently I was going to hear something of great importance, something which concerned me alone.

"Three years ago," my father began, in an easy fashion, "I thought I 'd like a little daughter. So I sent a letter to

a beautiful big bird which lives far away where the blue sky comes down to the ground. The bird has lots of little babies — girl babies and boy babies — on the shore of a lake where the sun shines day and night. She 's a very good-natured bird, and sometimes when she hears of a father who 's lonely because he has n't any children, she 'll put a little baby under her wing, and fly on over the beautiful country until she comes to its father's house. Now the bird knew that I was very lonely, because I had sent her a letter, so one day she picked up little Rhoda out of a lily leaf, and came flying along — flying along — "

"I remember! I remember!" I cried, clapping my hands. "She put me under her wing, and the feathers did tickle so!"

My father stopped to laugh; but in a moment he continued his narrative.

"She came flying along straight into the garden where I was walking about. She put you down —"

"And you said, 'Is this my little Rhoda?' and I said, 'Yes, father!'"

"Just so."

"Now tell it all over again, father," I demanded in delight.

My father laughed and hugged me closer. He still had that apologetic look on his face, and if I had been a little older and a little wiser, I would have known that my father was trying very hard to break something to me.

"She has a great many babies," he said at last, in an uneasy tone. "More than she knows what to do with. Yesterday I wrote her to send me another Rhoda."

I drew away from him, dumbfounded.

"Another Rhoda!" I exclaimed, with a gasp, frowning at him.

"Would n't you like a little sister

to play with?" he inquired, tenderly. "To sleep with you in your crib? And sit by you at the table?"

"No, father."

"Oh, yes, yes, you would, Rhoda!"

"No, no, no!" I screamed, breaking into angry tears.

He tried to comfort me in a blundering, laughing manner, but in the midst of all my sorrow grandmother's voice called to him from above.

"Robert!"

When the room cleared before my eyes I saw that I was alone.

At that same moment I had decided on my course of action. Very quickly, very quietly, I collected my plate and mug, my woolly dog and pleasant faced doll, and the yellow basket with the red handle, and stowed them all away in a dark corner under the sofa, where they were hidden from sight. My blue hood which hung in the hall, and was some-

thing quite new and precious, I put on my head, where it would be safest. Then half terrified, half defiant, I took up my position at the window to watch for the arrival of that other self which would dispute my realm. Every second I dreaded to hear the flutter of wings as the bird passed over the house, and to see another Rhoda standing expectant in the garden, to see my father, perhaps, hurrying to meet her with outstretched arms. It was a terrible hour.

In my need, however, I found a new friend, Norah from out the kitchen. I had known her before, as a person owning unlimited cake, and apt to display a strong liking for myself, but then she had been only an outsider, while now she was almost nearer to me than my mother. I threw myself straight into her willing arms, and told my story.

Norah was evidently astonished, and

almost incredulous. She did not believe that there could be another Rhoda. She had never heard of any bird, but when I persisted she shared my views, and entered into my position with great partisanship.

"But, sure, I 'd not worrit my mind," Norah said, consolingly. "No burrd in her sinses would take a baby out in such weather as this."

To be sure it was raining. I had not thought of that before. A fierce storm was beating against the house, and pools of water stood under the trees. The raindrops on the window pane ran down in small rivulets, and splashed against the sill just as my tears had done before.

"She 'll get her feathers all wet," I cried, triumphantly.

"And she 'll not dry them at my kitchen fire!" Norah declared, with stupendous daring.

We were out in the kitchen now. It

was a very pleasant homely place. A kettle sang on the stove, and a cat purred on the hearth, and the carpet had beautiful red stripes that seemed too pretty to walk on. Norah was very good to me. She had my high-chair ranged at the side of the hearth, and the cat, under compulsion, sat on my lap, and they all sang, — the kettle, the cat, and Norah, in their several fashions, as if they were happy. They acted very much as if they were entertaining royalty.

If it had not been for my sorrow I should have enjoyed myself, but the thought of that bird would pass across my mind. She had come once when she was sent for, bearing me from my lily leaf to my own home. The rain might fall, and the day might be very dark, but who was to know if that conscientious bird would not still fulfill her mission? Why, there were five children in the next house, and the bird must have

brought them all! When the bell rang, as it rang many times in the course of the day, I would creep to the kitchen door to listen, and feel greatly relieved when I found that it was only men and women who wanted to come in.

"It was no burrd," Norah would say, reporting on each occasion.

"Did you lock the door?" I asked, anxiously.

"I did that. There 's no burrd shall make her way into this house to-day," she answered, with a great show of determination.

Even as she spoke there came a faint strange sound from upstairs, a wailing cry, as though something very weak was angry and frightened, and wanted matters arranged to suit its own will and convenience. For one moment I thought Norah heard the sound, too. She seemed to smile; but on the instant she broke into a queer, elfish song, and began to

dance before the fire in an irresistible way that brought me capering beside her in a burst of glee. The bird had passed out of my mind, and I was Rhoda again, the little queen of the household, to whom all deferred, even grandmother in her tenderer moments.

It was very late that afternoon when I heard my father calling to me in an eager, excited manner. He came out into the kitchen where I and the cat were both in Norah's lap, indistinguishable in the growing darkness.

"Where is Rhoda?" he cried. "Where is my little daughter? I 've got something to show her."

I went to him quickly. It was nice to have him back again, and to be kissed in the old fond way. He threw me upon his shoulder and started off; but even as we stepped into the hall he called back to Norah, still with that boyish eagerness in his voice.

"You can come, too, Norah," he said, generously. "I want you to see what we 've got upstairs."

Norah joined us without comment, and followed behind through the hall and upstairs into mother's room. There it was very dark, for the curtains were drawn, and the only light came from the fire on the hearth, in front of which grandmother was sitting. She sat in a new majestic style, and on her lap there was something bundled up which she patted from time to time, and she trotted her feet in a funny seasaw fashion. When she saw us come in she smiled, and then very slowly she folded down a covering, and showed us a pillow, and on the pillow there were two little babies' heads.

"Twins!" Norah cried, and threw up her arms in the air. "Now the saints be good to us," she said, piously.

"S–s–sh — Not so loud, Norah,"

grandmother whispered, in rebuke, and trotted her feet a little harder.

"Let Rhoda see," father exclaimed. "Let Rhoda come quite close."

I went up closer by grandmother's knee and looked at them. It was a new experience, and for a moment I felt sorry for myself. Those about me must have shared the feeling, for their eyes grew kinder, and father patted my back, and Norah muttered under her breath.

"Sure it 's a come down in the world," I heard her say, pityingly.

Then, suddenly, those two little creatures half opened their eyes, and gazed at me. They smiled at me! They knew that I was their big sister! Oh, the wonder of the two little heads on the pillow, the mystery of the eyes that looked at me so placidly, with that smile of kinship in their depths! I forgot the bird, I forgot my jealousy. I was ready to give them anything, anything,

even the woolly dog and the yellow basket with the red handle, for the simple honor of their acquaintanceship. They were so young, and they were so weak! They could not walk, and they could not talk. They had everything to learn. I felt very old beside them, although I did not know that in that first moment when grandmother turned the covering down I had become the eldest child.

"Oh, grandma," I cried, radiantly, "you may have one, but the other one shall belong all to me!"

There was a movement in the bed, and some one called to me. I ran into the darkness and found my mother. There on the pillow beside her pretty dark hair she made a place for me, where we could see each other's eyes. Her arm was about me in a protecting way, as if she knew how hard the world had become for me.

"Rhoda," she said, with that smile which always seemed so wise, "mother's heart is a big, big place! There is room in it both for dear little Rhoda and the dear little babies."

I felt that I was content.

II

LILY-ANN

II

LILY-ANN

"THIS is Lily-Ann, Rhoda," my mother said, in an introductory tone. "She is to be your little nurse, and play with you. Do you know many nice games, Lily-Ann?"

From the shelter of my mother's chair I stared at the new-comer. I almost thought at first that it might be a little girl, until I noticed the shining folds of white apron. Lily-Ann was all white apron, down to the tops of her large, patched shoes. She was fourteen years old, perhaps, with the dignity of forty. She had a wide, smiling face, and appeared to be very agreeable in manner, so when she put out her hand I slipped mine cordially into it.

"I can play at wild beasts, and puss-in-the-corner, and 'ride a cock horse to Banbury Cross,'" she told my mother over my head. "I am experienced. I have helped to raise three children, ma'am."

She looked so small as she ended in this impressive fashion that my mother laughed, and my grandmother gleamed responsively through her glasses.

"It must be only quiet games, mind," my mother said. "You must n't teach Miss Rhoda to be noisy."

Lily-Ann promised to observe this caution faithfully, and I suppose she thought that they were only quiet games which we played that morning. We had all three, — Banbury Cross, then puss-in-the-corner, and, finally, wild beasts. Lily-Ann crawled under the bed and roared at me, now like a tiger, now plaintively, like a big pussy cat, and again with a deeper note that carried menace in its tone.

"That 's a lion," she explained, in between great volumes of sound. "Lions eat people all up. So do wolves. Now I 'm a wolf. Hear me crunch their bones!"

There was a horrible snarl under the bed, and something white and shining made a snatch at my foot, and then retreated, to return the next moment in a panting rush, much too real to be pleasant.

"Oh, please, Lily-Ann, I don't want to play wild beasts any more!" I exclaimed, half afraid; but only half afraid, for she was very obedient to my whims, and, when I cried loud enough, came out in a crushed state to be a little girl again.

At first I liked Lily-Ann. She was so companionable, and then she knew such quantities of strange things. For instance, it was she who showed me how to make my hair curl. It could be done

by eating crusts! There had always been a great deal of trouble about my crusts. I would never eat them, not even after I had been reminded of all the poor children in the world who had not a crust apiece to stay their hunger on, and whom it seemed that I should benefit in some marvelous way by eating mine.

"They can have these," I replied, generously, to such appeals to my feelings. "I 'll save them for them every day."

That, however, was before Lily-Ann came, and I learned that a crusty diet was warranted to make the hair curl. To think that little Rhoda Harcourt might have curly hair! What a nice thing that would be! Of course it meant months of work, but Lily-Ann, whose hair twisted from the roots, must surely know. Under her encouragement I ate all my own crusts, and begged so earnestly for more at the table that I became a wonder to the family.

"Is the curl coming, Lily-Ann?" I would ask, eagerly, in the mornings when she stood over me, comb in hand.

"It 's coming more and more every day," she asserted, to my great satisfaction.

"Ouch! How you do hurt, Lily-Ann!"

"That 's because it 's so curly. See that long, beautiful one. I can't hardly get my comb through!"

I sighed blissfully with my eyes full of tears, and wondered when my mother would notice the change in her little girl, for, indeed, something must have happened to my hair, judging from the jerks.

It was Lily-Ann again who taught me how to catch sparrows by throwing salt on their tails. I ran about very hot and eager all one morning, and ended by feeling rather foolish, for not a bird would be caught, though I crept

persistently on their track, always sure that the next time I should be successful. Still, I did not bear any grudge against Lily-Ann. It was not her fault that I was unfortunate, and then, too, she was very sympathetic.

"Why, my cousin caught one only yesterday!" she cried, in astonishment. "But then she is older than you are. And so smart! She turned a horsehair into a snake once. Did you ever do that, ma'am?"

"No," I answered, doubtfully; and immediately added, with growing enthusiasm, "oh, I should so like to do that!"

The end of it was that a faint suspicion which had crept upon me after the sparrow episode was quenched in the zeal with which I set myself to the awful task of raising snakes by the wholesale. There was always a touch of dread in the eagerness with which I

visited the snake incubator, — a rusty pan half-filled with water, and hidden in a secret space behind the lilac bush. Little by little the horror of the situation so overcame me that I hurriedly weeded the horsehairs out; but the six that remained were the finest and longest which I could find, destined, I could easily expect from their size, to become boa-constrictors.

I believed everything that Lily-Ann told me. Up to that time there had never been occasion for me to question any one's truth, nor had there been anything of which to be afraid. Now I learned of a new world that lay about me, — the Land of the Dark, — in which familiar furniture played wild pranks, and shadows came to have a very terrible meaning.

"After you go to bed at night," Lily-Ann said, impressively, holding up a fat forefinger, "there are Things that come

out and run all about the floor! Under the chairs and under the bed they creep around. Especially under the bed. If you should let your hand hang down, a Thing would take it and shake it!"

I peered at her from out the shelter of the bed-clothes, for I was in bed when this was first related, and she was sitting by me until I should go to sleep.

"I shall never do that, Lily-Ann," I said, faintly, gluing my arms closer to my sides.

"You might in your sleep," she returned, with grim significance.

"And that ain't all," she went on, after a short but terrible pause. "There 's a Bear in the garret. He wants something."

"What does he want?" I asked, fearfully, determined to know the worst at once.

"He wants a bad child. He 's hungry!"

Now I was bad, as I had just reason to know. Lily-Ann used to examine my record every night, and she was the greatest one that I have ever seen for pointing out flaws in character.

"I don't think I've been *very* bad to-day, Lily-Ann," I said, trembling.

"You took your little brother's ball," she answered, shortly.

"But I gave it back to him!" I cried, aghast.

"You slapped your little sister."

"But she slapped me, too!" I pleaded.

"Not until after you slapped her. And you are six years old."

That was one of the unkindest things about Lily-Ann; she was always trying to make me live up to my station. And it was so hard to be good, and hardest of all to be good enough for my great age. That night, however, I made a compact with her.

"Dear Lily-Ann," I said, piteously,

"if I go right to sleep by myself, so you can get your supper, will you chase away the Things and tell the Bear that there is no bad child in this house?"

I was not prone to criticise my elders and betters; but somehow I had remarked that Lily-Ann was fond of her supper.

She went away without much urging, and I lay there miserably in the dark. It seemed to me that there was a stir all through the quiet room, and out in the hall the garret door creaked in a new manner. The dark was so much blacker than it had ever been before, and even when I went down head and all under the covers I could hear the Things pattering about the floor, and the Bear rattling at the knob. Many a night after that I huddled myself up into a heap, afraid to sleep lest my hands should unclasp and slip out of bed, afraid to move lest the Bear on

the prowl for bad children should pounce on me and eat me up, sins and all. I used to pretend to sleep very loudly and heavily that he might think me a good child. Still, I felt that it must be hard to deceive a Bear, and that sooner or later he would make an end of me. As for the Things, I never had any hope of getting the better of them. All through the long nights they slipped and slid about, or stood waiting at the edge of the bed to shake hands, with a friendliness that was truly awful.

Even in my greatest fear, however, I never betrayed Lily-Ann. I was too much in her power to dare to tell tales about her. I used to marvel when the family commented on her faithfulness, or devised schemes for improving the home from which she had come. Many large bundles went out of our house, and I often heard my mother speaking in a sympathetic fashion of the little

girl whose childhood was passed in the service of others.

"Poor Lily-Ann, she 's never had any childhood of her own," she would say, regretfully.

Out in the kitchen, too, I had heard our Norah exchanging confidences on the subject with her cousin, who came in sometimes, when there was company, to help with the work.

"I give her all the cold things to take home every night," Norah confided. "The praties and bits of mate; just anything. They are that starving that they are not particular. Every smithereen of clothes that she has the mistress gave her, and the old lady has been open-handed, too. There 's many a ten-dollar bill finds its way to that house."

The cousin sniffed.

"The rest of us have to work for our own," she said. "Faith, it 's fine to be reckless sometimes."

"But I 'm not trusting her," Norah continued, darkly. "She tells lies. And she 's cross to my child!"

"Who is your child, Norah?" I asked, with sudden eagerness, pressing up close to her gingham apron.

Norah lifted me upon her capacious lap and patted my back.

"And it 's herself that wants to know," she cried, with a rallying laugh. "See that now! Ain't she growing a big girl, Bridget? See the praties in her cheeks! Sure, she 's purty enough to be Irish."

"But who is your child, Norah?" I persisted, jealously; and it was only when a burst of laughter broke from the two women that I understood, and hid my face in the concealing folds of the gingham apron.

I was very good to Lily-Ann after this time. Not that I had ever been bad to her before; but now I began to

join in the work of charity. I made her a present of the little gold locket which my grandmother Lawrence gave me on my last birthday, and of my second-best pair of shoes, which had been red once, and still retained a delightful color. I wanted to give her my Sunday cloak, also, but she reminded me that there were other Sundays yet to come. She did take my bank with its one jingling gold coin in it. Unfortunately, all the money of less value had been pried out long ago to buy candy, but I told Lily-Ann how sorry I was that the little red house was not filled to the chimney with pennies. I promised that I would give her all my money in the future to take home to her family, so that they might never be hungry again. Lily-Ann heard me in silence. She did not thank me with her lips, but when the Things grew too rampant at night she would reprove them sometimes in a stern manner.

"Go away!" she would cry, stamping her foot energetically. "Rhoda is a good child."

The Things and the Bear all grunted with the same voice as they retreated in discontent to their lairs; but I was not critical. It was enough for me that they went, if only for a time. Always I remembered that Lily-Ann could summon them at will, and her importance grew greater day by day.

There were hours, however, when I escaped into the safety of my mother's room. I was not too small to understand the delights of that cheerful room, — the glittering objects on the dressing-table, the deep bureau drawers filled with wonders much too dainty for a child to touch. There were keepsakes, also, mementos of my mother's childhood and youth; prize books in foreign tongues, won at school and laid away in tissue paper; bits of costly lace, and

many little worthless, well-beloved possessions. In the closet there was a box on an upper shelf. Quite an ordinary box it was on the outside, made of pasteboard and tied with bands of yellow ribbon which had once been white. My mother lifted the cover one day, and showed me what was inside. It was the most wonderful thing, and it had come off her wedding-cake. There was a white platform surrounded with a wreath of white roses and leaves, and in the center of the platform there stood under a wreathed arch two little dolls, arm in arm.

"They are going to be married," my mother said. "They came off the top of my cake when I was married."

"Oh, is n't it too sweet for anything!" I cried, in an ecstasy. "But, mother, why does the lady doll wear a veil?"

"All brides do. You shall, too, some day."

"Shall I?" I questioned, doubtfully. "But, mother, dear, suppose I should grow up, and never get married, won't you give me these little dolls to play with?"

"If that should happen I suppose I must," my mother said, with a laugh, and tied the box up tightly again, and put it back on the upper shelf.

I dreamed about that box. I talked of it to Lily-Ann, and described the enchanting veil at great length; and I even condescended to tell the twins about the dolls that mother had. Once, with great pain from the acute rasping of my knees, I climbed up the closet shelves, and peeked in a loose corner of the box. Then I came down again, perfectly satisfied, for the dolls were still there, and if I escaped marriage they were to be my own. I determined that I would never marry. It would be at too great a cost.

Soon after this there came a day when everything seemed to go wrong. Lily-Ann was very cross, while my mother looked sad and even frightened. She went up and down stairs many times. She watched me furtively, and asked whispered questions of Lily-Ann. I wondered what Lily-Ann could possibly be telling her. I knew that it was not about me, for I had been very good that afternoon. To be sure, I had pulled the cat's tail; but she and I had kissed each other affectionately afterwards, and were friends again. Nor was Lily-Ann apt to reveal my misdeeds. She liked to judge me herself in that dread hour when the dark brought repentance. Still, as the questions went on and on, I was sure that I heard my name, not once but many times, now from Lily-Ann, and now from my mother, with a gasp of dismay.

Then my mother took me in her arms and kissed me, and rocked me as if I were a baby again, and in the middle of it all made me a little confidence.

"Rhoda, mother always meant to give you those little dolls," she said.

"Oh, did you, mother!" I cried, eagerly.

'But giving is different from taking. Do you know what it means to steal a thing, Rhoda?"

I nodded solemnly.

"'Thou shalt not steal,' you know the Bible says."

"Yes, mother."

"Did you climb up into my closet one day?"

I hung my head.

"Rhoda, when you knew that you had only to ask for mother to give them to you, why did you take away my little dolls?"

"But I did not take them," I cried,

in surprise. "I only looked at them. Was I very bad, mother?"

"You did n't take them? Think what you are saying, Rhoda."

"I did not take them," I protested, breaking into tears, for though I was bad, I knew that I was not that bad.

I could see that she did not believe me. She sighed in a way that I had never heard my mother sigh before, and set me down on the floor beside her. Then she took me by the hand, and we made a very solemn pilgrimage up the stairs, and through her room into the one which was my own, straight up into the corner where my doll-house stood. She opened the little door, and motioned me to look in. The bride and groom were leaning stiffly side by side against the sofa in the parlor! They stared back at me with scorn on their sugar faces, and there was, also, something accusing in their expression, as if they were saying, "Little girl,

how do we come here?" Still I would not confess. I had not taken them. I had wanted them very much, but now I did not want them at all. I should have liked to smash their sugar heads, for it was their fault. They had done it themselves, stepping down from their high shelf in the middle of the night. They were tired of living tied up in a box, and wanted my doll-house to set up housekeeping in. They had done it themselves just to plague me. There was no other way to explain it.

"What does she say?" grandmother asked, creeping in behind us.

"Not the truth!" my mother cried. "I should never have suspected my child of lying and stealing! But Lily-Ann says it is not the first time!"

I stood and looked at them. It almost seemed as if I did not love them any more. They knew me so little that they thought I could steal those sugar dolls.

"Grandma, put her to bed for me," my mother said, still with that frightened look on her face. "I don't know what to say to her. I must ask her father."

Grandmother put me to bed, with slow, patient fingers. She tucked me in, and kissed me in quite a tender way.

"Tell grandma," she urged, in a whisper, bending down until her spectacles touched my hot cheek.

But still I would not confess.

It was very quiet in my little room after she had gone. I could hear the dishes rattling down-stairs, as Norah set the table with a bang of the plates and a thump of the knives. We were going to have honey for supper and little cakes with frosted tops baked in scolloped patty-pans. I wondered whether I should have any supper, or must lie there in the dark, while they talked about me at the supper-table.

I did not think that *I* could enjoy frosted cake baked in scolloped patty-pans if *my* little girl were alone up-stairs in the dark. When I grew up and married, for I might as well marry now, I would never treat any one so. Never! Never! ! Never! ! !

"Oh, please, God, let me hurry and grow up," I whispered to the darkness. "And, oh, please, God, let me have frosted cake for my supper!"

I waited for the prayer to bear fruit. Sometimes prayers were rather slow. I heard my father come home with a cheerful rustle of parcels. He hung up his coat and hat in the hall, and tiptoed up-stairs to wash his hands. He knew that the twins were asleep in their cribs; but he did not know that I was beyond in the darkness, afraid to speak to him. He did not miss me, although I was always the first to welcome him at the door. Nobody seemed to miss me. I heard

them draw up their chairs to the table. Now they were eating honey. Now they were eating frosted cake. Lily-Ann would have some of the cake. They believed in her. It was only their own little girl whom they sent to bed without her supper. It was only Rhoda whom nobody loved. If God would let me grow up quick, I would go away and not be a trouble to them any more. Perhaps off in the country I might find somebody who would love me, and believe in me, for I did not want to be loved unless I was believed in. I should be very lonely at first, nearly as lonely as I was now. A sore place came in my throat that made me cry because it hurt so.

The kitchen door opened in the distance, and a whirlwind swept into the dining-room. There was a pause, punctuated by loud remarks delivered in a high Irish voice, and then the whirl-

wind came up the stairs, and swept me out of my bed. It was Norah. I clung to her, for she was the only thing which I had left to love in the whole world. My father and mother had deserted me, but Norah was staunch. She kissed me as she carried me, big girl as I was, straight down the steps into the dazzling light of the supper-table. Norah was excited. She had a red spot on each cheek, and her eyes shone like stars. She held me tightly with one arm and gesticulated with the other. Against the white panel of the kitchen door Lily-Ann was crouched in a timid, frightened fashion, with all the spirit gone out of her wide face, and almost the very curl gone out of her hair.

"She had them dolls yisterday," Norah cried, accusingly, her finger pointed straight at the kitchen door. "I saw them in her box. Sure, I thought that the mistress gave them to

her, and it 's not for the likes of me to say what the mistress shall give or not give. Then this morning when there was questions asked, she crept upstairs and put them in the doll-house. The sarpent! Is my child to lie in the dark crying her heart out, and that sarpent set at my kitchen-table drinking her tay, and telling me wicked tales of my child?"

Nobody answered her. They stared at her in bewilderment. Norah had never acted like that before.

"If there was questions to be asked, why was n't I asked?" she went on, angrily. "If the mistress or the master had said to me, 'Norah, where 's them little dolls?' I would have told them the truth. I would have said, 'Lily-Ann stole them yisterday, ma'am, and to-day she put them in the doll-house, sur.' But, no, they don't ask honest old Norah. They listen to that sarpent

backbiting my child. The little innocent creatur! The dear little old-fashioned thing that niver took nought from nobody!"

I put my arms around Norah's neck, and hugged her until I nearly strangled her.

"Give Rhoda to me, Norah," my mother said, jealously.

"There 's only one thing more to be said, ma'am," Norah continued, obstinately standing her ground, still with my arms about her neck. "Either old Norah goes or that sarpent goes. I 'll have no sarpents in my kitchen."

They were all looking at Lily-Ann now. There was a ring of truth about Norah's story which had convinced them at last.

"Have you anything to say, Lily-Ann?" my father asked, sternly.

She had nothing to say. As she drooped a little closer to the door and

wiped her eyes in a miserable fashion, I felt that I could forgive her all the harm which she had done me. Poor Lily-Ann, who my mother said had never been a child!

"Oh, please, Norah, let Lily-Ann stay!" I cried, piteously. "I'll be so good if you'll let Lily-Ann stay!"

Norah might, perhaps, have been softened by my appeal, but my father would not listen. The words which he used were very stern ones, and his was the hand that held open the door for Lily-Ann to pass out of the house. She went slowly, almost regretfully, as though at the last she felt repentance. I never saw her again.

It was many a long year, however, before I cast off her evil spell. Even in the illnesses of my maturer years those crawling Things have come back, passing across the mirror of a pain-racked mind with all the horror of child-

ish ignorance and fear. Yet I still feel that I have forgiven Lily-Ann. Coming from the home that she did, and unwatched and unsuspected as she was, she might easily have destroyed the holy innocence of a child's life. But she left me as she found me.

I went upstairs very quietly that night. There was a candle burning on the bedroom table, and something which my prayer had brought, something frosted, with scolloped edges, was tucked under my pillow. The whole family came to put me to bed, and made so much of me that I glowed under their affection.

"She will forget it all in time," my father said, tenderly, unwitting of my long memory. "Evil dies away quickly from a child's mind."

My mother was more impulsive. She went down on her knees and put her arms about me.

"Forgive mother," she whispered, with her mouth against my ear. "Mother knows how true you are, Rhoda!"

After all there was really something for which to thank Lily-Ann.

III

THE OLD MAJOR

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THE OLD MAJOR

ABOUT our house there was a garden, with round beds of blooming plants, and a shady apple-tree or two to break the glare of the summer sun. In one corner the hollyhocks grew, and along the path to the gate purple flags appeared each spring in uneven rows, like isolated bands of soldiers marching on a common enemy. There were dandelions in the grass, and a lilac bush near the front door. Here I used to play, in a bright pink sun-bonnet, and little black slippers which buttoned with a band about my ankle. Secretly I considered myself rather beautiful, and as for my conquests, they stretched down the street and around the block. There

was the grocer's boy, and the elderly lady from over the way, who wore one kind of hair in the morning and another kind in the afternoon, and ordinary strangers passing through the town, and, last of all, but first in my estimation, the old major.

Every day at the same hour he passed the house, leaning on a cane. When the sun was bright he stepped along quickly, with an alert carriage of the head; but there were cloudy days when his step was slow and feeble, and even his smile lost some of its usual charm.

"Hello, little girl," he said, in a ponderous fashion, the first time that he saw me perched on the gate. "Hello! Hello! Hello!"

The hellos reached a long distance, and grew very gruff at the end, but there was a twinkle in his eye, and he had a beautiful bright star on his watch-chain, with which I longed to play.

I gravely put out a small hand to him.

"My name is Rhoda," I said, in a burst of confidence. "I live here in this house. I was six years old yesterday."

"Were you!" he replied, evidently much impressed. "That's very old, very old."

He went on slowly down the block, but when he turned on his way back, he stopped again at the gate to discuss my age.

"Six, was it?" he questioned. "Well! Well! Perhaps you can tell me what time it is."

I shook my head, with a fascinated look at the gleaming star.

"I haven't a watch."

"But you don't need a watch," he answered. "See here."

He stooped down, painfully, grasping the fence for support, and picked the snowy seed-ball of a dandelion plant.

Then he straightened up, slowly, and blew at the feathery toy.

"One, two, three, four, five! Five o'clock. Time for the old major to go in out of the damp."

Then he turned away from me, and went on up the street, his cane digging little holes in the path, and he himself forgetting all about the child whom he had left still perched on her gate. I had not entirely passed from his memory, however, for when he came to his own gate far in the distance, he took off his hat, and gallantly waved it to me before he went in out of the damp.

"Mother, I love the old major!" I said one day.

"What major?" my mother asked, looking up from her work with a smile.

She was making small ruffled skirts and aprons with pockets. She could make the most beautiful things, all out of her own head.

"What major? Why, my major. Mother, has the old major any little girls or boys that I could play with? Oh, I should so like to play with his little girls and boys!"

"Major Daniel Clark has n't any little girls or boys. He lost them all, dear. He is a very lonely man."

"Did n't he ever find them again, mother?"

"No, dear. Never again."

Now, I was very good at finding things. I found grandmother's spectacles ten times a day, even when they were only lost in her soft, white hair. And once I found mother's thimble when little brother Dick had it in his mouth, and it was just going down red lane. Norah said that I had a pair of bright eyes, and my very father, when he wanted his slippers, could think of no one so trustworthy to send as I. To find little girls and boys would be quite

easy, for they were much larger things. I had only to ask all the girls and boys who came past my gate if they belonged to the major, and, when the right ones came, we would run hand-in-hand up to that distant door and go in. He would be so pleased, and never lonely again. And, perhaps — Just suppose that he would be my friend forever and ever!

I was waiting on my gate the next day when he came by.

"Oh, Major!" I cried, excitedly, nodding my head at him, "I 'm going to find your little girls and boys for you!"

"My little girls and boys?" he asked, perplexed.

"Yes. The ones that you lost so long ago."

He turned quite suddenly on his way, so quickly that I thought that he was angry, but when he came back he

stopped at the gate again. He took my face softly between his hands, and looked down deep into my eyes, into the little circles where there were pictures.

"When you grow up, always remember that the old major loved you," he said, hurriedly, and then went back toward the house from which he had come out so shortly before.

We were great friends after that. We held long conversations over the gate, about my dolls, and the hobby-horse which had lately come to live in the hall. We discussed the best way to raise children, and how convenient it would be if aprons could only be made to button in front. We both had original ideas on things, and often differed, but none of my new clothes ever seemed quite real to me until the major had admired them, and pinched my cheeks with that air of gallantry which showed

that I was a woman. He brought me presents, very wonderful things; bright pebbles which he picked up on the street, willow whistles, and a tiny basket carved from a peach-stone, which I hung on a ribbon about my neck. I gave him flowers, and once, when no one was looking, I let him kiss me in the shadow of the pink sunbonnet.

If the major and I met thus on the sunny days, when it rained there came a blank in my life. Then he could not go out at all, but must stay shut up in his house until the weather cleared again. There was something the matter with the major which made this necessary. In some unaccountable way he was different from other people, and to be different from other people was sad, and was, moreover, a thing which never happened in our family.

Now, grandmother had a little red brick house that stood on her mantel-

piece which aided me a great deal in the stormy times. A little man and woman lived in this house who were never of the same mind, and carried their lack of sympathy to such an alarming extent that they used separate doors, and, as far as I could see, had never met in the course of their lives. For as sure as the man with the umbrella came out of one door, the little lady with the roses in her bonnet gathered up her skirts, and scurried in as if she were afraid to meet him. With her went the sunshine and the blue look to the sky, and the rain came down heavy and fast. But if the old man went into his house, the old lady sprang out, with a smile on her face, the rain stopped falling, and the sun came out. Then, by and by, the major would walk down the street, and stop to chat awhile.

I used to run into grandmother's

room every morning to look at that house.

"Grandma," I cried, eagerly, "has the little lady come out to-day?"

Then I took my stand soberly in front of the mantelpiece and regarded the two figures with much attention.

"Grandma," I said once, "do you think that they can be relations?"

Grandmother took up a stitch in her knitting without replying.

"Because, if they are," I went on, indignantly, "I think that they ought to be ashamed!"

"Ashamed of what, Rhoda?"

"Why, of the way that they act. They don't even look at each other! And, grandma, I think that he 's the worst. He goes in with such a click when she comes out. He 's so afraid that she 'll say something to him."

Grandmother looked up over her spectacles.

"Now that I come to think of it," she said, "they 've acted that way for forty years."

"I wonder why he don't like her?" I went on, musingly. "Is it because she 's got flowers in her bonnet, and he has n't? Look, grandma, she 's coming out very quietly. She 's going to catch him this time. Oh, he 's gone in with a click! And he never said a word!"

"We 'll have fair weather now, Rhoda."

"And my major will come out, grandma."

"He 's my major!" little Dick cried.

"He 's my major!" Beatrice asserted.

"No such thing!" I said, turning on them angrily. "He belongs all to me. Don't he, grandma?"

Grandmother did not answer, but I knew that he did. When the twins came, hand-in-hand, down the path to see him, he would pat their fat arms through the spokes of the gate, but it

was always I to whom he wished to talk, for I was more of his own age and not a baby like them.

"Baby yourself!" Dick said, when I mentioned this, and slapped me, but it made no difference.

Sometimes the lady from across the way would come over to walk with the major. They were old friends, and had a great deal to talk about. I remember seeing her shake her finger at him when she found him leaning on my gate.

"So you 're trying to turn another woman's head!" she cried, gayly.

He wheeled upon her with that sudden straightening of his shoulders that would come so unexpectedly.

"Did I ever turn yours, Kitty?" he asked, with a mischievous smile.

"Dozens of times," she cried. "Dozens of times!"

Then she took his arm, and they went up and down in the bright sunshine,

up and down, while the major would thump his cane upon the ground with that gruff laugh that always seemed merrier than other people's. His white hair was smoothly brushed, and his black hat was set on jauntily, and his kind eyes shone as if he were young again. I noticed that the lady from over the way always wore a black silk dress and her best, curly, brown hair whenever she came to walk with the major, and, also, a battered silver bracelet which looked as if it had been chewed. The major would glance at it and laugh.

"I took castor-oil to buy that bracelet," he said once, with his twinkle.

It sounded funny, but I knew just what he meant. I had made dollars and dollars myself taking castor-oil, except that time when Auntie May mixed it so cunningly with lemonade that it went down and down to the very dregs, and I never discovered until

then how I had been cheated out of my just dues.

"So that was it!" the lady from over the way exclaimed, patting the bracelet. "I always knew that there was something curious about it."

"It was harder than leading a regiment into action," the major answered, soberly, and then broke into a gleeful laugh. "I wouldn't do it for you now!" he cried.

First she threatened him with the bracelet. Then she took his arm again, and they went on in the sunshine, talking of all the many people whom they had known in their lives. Her touch on his arm was very light, guiding, and sustaining, rather than dependent, but the old major thought that she leant upon him.

I was not jealous of the lady from over the way. I felt that we shared the major between us, and then it was

always at my gate that he stopped first. It was here that he told me about a trip that he was intending to make.

"I 'm going off to the city for a week," he said.

"Are you, Major?" I questioned, sorrowfully, for a week had seven days in it, and even a day was a long, long time. No wonder that my eyes were full of tears.

"There, there," he said. "Bear it like a woman."

I was not a woman, but sometimes the major used to forget. I thought that it was because I looked so tall when I stood on my gate.

He put out his kind old hand and smoothed my hair.

"What shall I bring you from the city?" he asked. "A new doll? What would you like best of all, Rhoda?"

I considered the question. There

were so many things that the major might bring from the city. There were little doll-babies, or picture-books, or cups and saucers, or hooples with bells. Then I had an inspiration. I leaned forward in a glow of excitement.

"I should like — Oh, Major! Will you really give it to me? I should like the littlest watch in the world. With a star! With a star, just like yours!"

"You shall have it," he answered, promptly, as if there was nothing unusual in such a grand request. "Now, remember, if all goes well, I'll be at the gate a week from to-day. And I'll have that watch right here in my pocket."

"And I'll bring flowers!" I cried, joyfully. "All the flowers that you love best, Major."

"Good-by," he said, with a sudden touch of emotion.

"Good-by," I answered, rather tear-

fully, for even the watch could not reconcile me to his absence.

He turned to go, and came back again.

"Pray for the old major," he said, in a husky whisper.

Through my tears I saw him go up the block, a little slower than usual, as if he did not want to go. At the gate he stopped and waved his hat to me, as he had done on that first day, and squared his gallant old shoulders before he passed into the house. I always wished that I had kissed him before he went.

It was not hard to pray for the major, for I believed in the efficacy of prayer. When the elastic bands became loosened in the black doll, Topsy, and she lost her wool and her legs at the same time, I went down, solemnly, on my knees on the floor, and prayed for them to grow together again. And they did, in the

night. And when I lost my little front tooth, I prayed to God and He sent me a new one! So it was not hard to pray for the major. But somehow or other I did not like to do it before my mother. It seemed such a secret sort of a prayer. I waited until I was safe under the covers, and she had taken away the light. Then I climbed out of the bed, in the big darkness, and went down on the floor. I prayed to God to bless the old major, and bring him back safely to me. I said it over twice, so that God would not forget.

"So the old major has gone to the city," my father said, at the breakfast table. "I can remember him when he was in the pride of his strength, a magnificent figure on horseback. He never rose as high in the service as he should. He made powerful enemies and slipped into the background."

"It's twenty years since his wife

died," my mother's soft voice added. "He has lived alone in that big house ever since. Think of it, Robert!"

"Such is the heart's fidelity," father answered, with his face turned toward hers.

"When he comes back we must make more of him," mother said.

It was a very long week, but even long weeks have a way of slipping by at last. I played about the house and the garden with the twins, but I never went near the gate, not until the day dawned which was seven times from last Friday, and was Friday again, bright and clear, the very day for the major's home-coming. There were so many flowers in the garden that morning, such especially large ones. They knew, too, that the major was coming home, and had put on their prettiest dresses in his honor.

It was quite a puzzle to me what I

should put on. I had a closet full of dresses. There was a beautiful blue silk one, too good for anything but church, which matched a little blue parasol. And there was a lovely white one with a lace flounce, which went with my scolloped petticoat. My third best dress had roses and buttons on it, and the fourth best was covered with brown spots, like cough drops. I loved my little dresses, and it was so hard to tell which dress should come out, and which must stay shut up in the closet, with nobody to admire them.

"Shall it be the cough drop dress, mother?" I asked, uncertainly.

"It 's such a wonderful day, and the sun shines so bright, that I think you might put on the white dress with the lace flounce," my mother said, with that smile which meant that she was laughing with me, and not at me.

"And my little black slippers?"

"And your little black slippers."

"And, mother, you remember the time that I was your little flower girl? And you put roses in my hair so it looked like a crown? I 'd like to be the major's little flower girl."

My mother lent herself to the pretty idea. She crowned my head with roses. There were roses at my throat, and a big, floating, pink sash swept down my back, and there were roses in my hand for the major, one bunch to give him with a kiss when he came, and another to give him with my love when he went.

Grandmother shook her wise head when she saw that toilet.

"If she were my child," she said, "I should dress her in brown gingham down to her heels, and tie her hair with shoe-laces."

I gasped, and mother laughed.

"She's vain," grandmother went on, severely. "Suppose she should grow up a poppet!"

I carried that awful name out with me as I climbed upon the gate, and stared out, bashfully, at the street. I was afraid to think how beautiful I might be.

The grocer's boy came by, my own particular grocer's boy. Stricken with sudden admiration for my charms he put down his basket, and expressed his sentiments.

"Say, you are a daisy!" he said.

"Go away, Jakie," I answered, with embarrassment. "I have n't time to play with you now. Go away! I 'm busy."

He was quite crushed by my new haughtiness, and lingered about, thinking that I would relent, but all my smiles and flowers were waiting for that bent figure which I loved so well.

An hour slipped by, but still the major did not come. My crown grew heavy on my head, and the flowers wilted in my hot hands. The lady from over the way came to ask me questions. She had on her ugliest hair, and there were tears in her eyes.

"What are you doing, Rhoda?" she asked, with an anxious look.

Then she seemed to divine.

"You are not watching for the major!" she exclaimed.

"Yes," I answered, wearily.

"Does n't your mother know, child?" she cried. "But, then, he never told any one. They found that there must be an operation, and he was not strong. There was no one whom he loved there at the end. He died, as he lived, all alone. Oh, poor old man! Poor old man! Let me go by, child! Let me go by!"

She thrust herself in the little gate, wheeling me back against the fence, and went up the path to our house.

Then, in hardly a moment, Norah came out and led me in, and proceeded to take off all my pretty things and put on a common dress, quite an old one, with a darn on the sleeve.

"I don't want that dress, Norah," I protested. "I want my white dress. I want to see my major. I want to be his little flower girl."

I went in where my mother sat with the lady from over the way, and explained the situation through my tears. Mother was very tender with me. Somehow I felt that she herself was sorry about something, for she dropped a tear on the wilted roses which I still held in my hand. Together we went out into the garden. Together we gathered all the flowers that there were — the big ones and the little ones —

and formed them into a great bunch. It was for the major. I danced with sheer delight, knowing only too well how the kind face would light up when he saw all the flowers which he had admired so often made a present to him. I added buttercups, and dandelions, and bits of feathery grass, while mother watched me, with a sad smile, and said never a word.

The lady from over the way cried very hard on our front steps, but afterwards she dried her eyes and took my flowers to the major.

He did not come the next day or the next, though I watched at the gate, and then something strange happened. I was told not to go into the garden.

"Not this morning, Rhoda," my mother said. "Grandma and I are going out, and you must stay in the house. When we come back you may go out."

She dressed herself very quietly that day, all in dark things, and she and grandmother did not look joyful, as they always did when they went out together.

"I 'd like to go, too," I said, wistfully.

Then Norah coaxed me.

"Ah, stay and play with your Norah," she cried. "Sure you 'll not be after leaving your Norah alone in this big house!"

I always liked to play with Norah, when her work was done and she had time to be sociable. That day we played blindman's buff together — she, and I and the twins. Norah was always the blind man, and she was the longest time catching us, and when she did she could never tell who it might be. She would guess quite impossible people, — the grocer's boy, and the lady from over the way, and her own very mother in Ireland, — and she never once, by any

chance, thought that it was Rhoda or little Dick or Trixie.

"Sure, you 're too big to be Trixie!" she cried, when we told her who it was.

That day, when the blind man was out of breath, and his feet were sore from walking hundreds of miles, I climbed up on the window-sill and watched the people going along the street. There were a great many of them, much more than usual. Suddenly there was the sound of a fife and drum in the distance, and a long line of carriages came into sight, and one was filled with beautiful flowers, and one was draped with a torn old flag.

"Come quick, Norah!" I cried, eagerly. "It 's a procession!"

"It 's the old major's funeral," Norah said, coming with the twins in her arms to look over my shoulder.

I had known, somehow, that it was the major's, for everything nice belonged to him. I was so proud to think that my major should have all that big procession, with the lovely flowers and the music in front. I looked for him in every carriage, that I might wave as he went by. He was not there, but other people were, — my mother and my grandmother, and the lady from over the way, and men with gold braid on their coats come to grace the major's procession.

"Is it all his, Norah?" I asked.

"Sure, dear."

"I am so glad," I cried. "Oh, I'm so glad!"

I clapped my hands in my delight, and was quite angry with Norah when she dragged me, hurriedly, away from the window.

That night my mother took me in her lap, and told me that the old major

had gone to heaven. I had heard of heaven before. It was where I came from, and the twins, away back in the early days. Heaven was a nice place, and now, as the major's home, it acquired a new charm. But there was one drawback.

"Shan't I ever see him again, mother?" I asked.

"Never again, Rhoda."

"But, mother, it 's a children's place," I urged, anxiously. "And the major is old, quite old. He won't like it there, mother."

"The major has gone to heaven to be a little child again," my mother said, with a sob.

Then she put a blue velvet box in my hand. Inside there was the littlest watch in the world, and on the back of the watch there was a star in blue stones. It was the last thing which the old major bought before he went to heaven.

IV

THE FIRESIDE GOD

A Christmas Dream that Came True

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"ENGLAND is a long way off," grandmother said, softly. "Especially at Christmas time."

She was not talking to any one in particular, but just to herself. She had been sitting for quite awhile by the parlor window reading her Bible. Sometimes her eyes were fastened on the page, and sometimes when a strange step came down the street, she would glance up hurriedly, almost in an eager way, as if she were watching for some one. Then, when she saw who it was, her eyes would drop again on the book in a disappointed fashion. I knew what

she would do next. Very slowly she would turn the pages right to the middle of the Bible, where a picture lay between the leaves.

"Isn't that father, grandma?" I asked, anxiously, leaning against her knee.

"No, Rhoda," she said, in that decisive way of hers.

I hung closer over the picture to make real sure.

It looked so like father when he was a little boy that I thought she must be mistaken. Yet somehow it was different. This little boy was fairer. There was a curl of hair on the page, a light-brown curl with red glints in it, and a tiny wreath made of pressed lilacs which once upon a time he had joined together, flower by flower, out in our front garden. I could almost see him doing it, while the wind blew through those brown curls.

"Oh, I do hope that he is n't grown up!" I cried, quickly.

People had such an astonishing way of growing up fast. Why, even Joseph in his pretty new coat in the Bible was not a little boy any longer! And I had always so longed to play with Joseph.

Grandmother did not tell me anything more about the picture. She took it out of my hand, and put it back on the page beside the curl and the faded lilac ring. Then she closed the book tightly; but when I ran into the parlor five minutes later to announce a visitor the picture was out again on her lap.

"Evelyn is coming, grandma!" I cried.

The tall young lady who followed me into the room was grandmother's great friend, and, also, in a way she was mine. I loved her because she was so beautiful; but grandmother loved her because they both liked a man named Frank.

He was engaged to Evelyn. I had heard my mother say so.

"Is there any news?" grandmother asked, eagerly.

She had risen out of her chair and looked startled.

Evelyn went up to her with a letter in her hand.

"Frank is quite well," she said, "and very busy. Would you like to see his letter?"

Grandmother hesitated. She almost turned her back upon Evelyn.

"No," she answered, slowly. "No. When he writes a letter to *me*, I will read it. Not before."

"Oh, you are hard on Frank," Evelyn protested. "How can he write to you? Did n't you say you would have nothing more to do with him, unless he gave up his profession?"

"Profession! Has an actor a profession?" grandmother cried. "This is the

first time I ever heard it called by that name. I said he was to choose between his mother and a child's mad whim, and he made his choice."

She picked up the picture and looked at it with tears in her eyes.

"I could forgive him anything but acting," she said. "Sometimes I think I could even forgive him that. I do so long to see him again."

Evelyn slipped her arm about grandmother.

"He will come back," she cried, consolingly.

"Never," grandmother replied, with a despairing glance at the empty street. "Don't I know him, Evelyn? Man and boy? He is as stubborn as I am."

"Would the little boy play with me, grandma, if he came back?" I asked, excitedly.

They both looked at me, but Evelyn was the only one who smiled.

"Perhaps," she said. "He used to be very fond of you."

After that I was always watching for the little boy. Every morning when I got up I looked out of the window to see if he were not coming in our gate. And the last thing before I went to bed, I looked out carefully again. I thought that I should know him by his hair, and I felt how lovely it would be if he would only come at Christmas time. Christmas was not going to be so nice that year as usual. I did not think that I should get anything. There were lots of presents in the house for other children, even my little brother and sister, but somehow there did not seem to be any for Rhoda!

"Father," I said, one morning, "there's a very pretty book in your top drawer. A child's book. I wonder whose it is?"

He was quite busy reading his paper, but he answered me at once.

"That 's for a little friend of mine," he declared. "It 's a secret."

"Oh! Is she a good girl, father?"

He glanced at me and laughed.

"Sometimes she 's awfully good," he answered.

Then it was not for me. Nobody ever seemed to think that I was good, not even when I was trying my best. It must be grand to be good! Just think of being born that way, so that you could not help it, but went on growing better and better until you died! There was a little girl down the street like that. We played together on sunny days. I found it very hard to play with any one who was so good.

"And sometimes," my father went on, still with that smile in his eyes, "sometimes she 's so dreadfully bad that I 'm really shocked!"

"Oh!" I said again.

I had seen my father shocked. When he was shocked, he always laughed very hard.

"Has it pictures, father?" I asked, meekly, trying to turn the subject.

"No. My little friend does n't care about pictures," he answered, indifferently.

Then it was not for me. I was very fond of pictures. Everybody knew that. It did seem queer that in all the many packages which he brought home, night after night, — round ones, and square ones, and even some with mysterious humpy corners, — there should not be a single thing for Rhoda! And Christmas was coming faster and faster.

Evelyn, too, had all manner of pretty presents laid by for other little girls, quite strange little girls, who did not love her at all so far as I could see, but she never said a word about my present; not even one day when she

called me into her house and opened her parlor door. She opened it very softly, as if there were company, and she put her finger on her lip that I should not speak.

There was company. Inside the room was filled with dolls! They sat in rows on the sofa and on the piano, they lay in careless heaps on the chairs and tables; blue-eyed dolls and black-eyed dolls, some that went promptly to sleep when you laid them down, some in Japanese dresses, and some that wore long clothes and caps like sure enough babies. We went about solemnly, hand in hand, and looked at them all. They stared back as if they wanted a mother, and one on the center-table, a queen of a doll with earrings in her ears, held out her arms to come to me!

"Whom do you think they're all for?" Evelyn asked, gayly. "Guess."

I held her closer by the hand and

gazed about me. *I* was very fond of dolls. I had never had enough. I believed that once or twice I had mentioned the fact. I drew a long breath. Just suppose —

"They 're for orphans," Evelyn cried, quickly. "You know what orphans are, don't you, Rhoda? They are poor children who have n't any mothers or fathers to buy them dolls! It 's a very sad thing to be an orphan."

I glanced about me again. The queen was very beautiful.

"Will they be good to them?" I questioned, wistfully.

I had heard of people whipping dolls! And once a little boy had drowned a doll! His sister's! It was dreadful!

"Oh, I 'm sure this doll is going to be spoiled," Evelyn answered, with her hand on the queen.

I looked from her to the great doll with shy admiration. They both had

the same fair hair, and the same pink cheeks and the same gray eyes. Their faces were just like flowers.

"I think her name is Evelyn, too," I said.

I had always thought that Evelyn liked me, but that day I was sure of it. We had a long talk in a big chair about all the things which I wanted for Christmas. She said that I was surely to come Christmas morning and see the orphans get their dolls. Somebody named Santa Claus would be there. I had heard of Santa Claus before, but only in a general sort of a way. He seemed to be a very kindly sort of person who gave away dolls by the hundred, sometimes to orphans, and sometimes just to little girls who needed them. It was a question how much you had to need them.

At the very last Evelyn gave me a message to deliver.

"Rhoda," she said, earnestly, "tell grandmother that there is good news. What she was wishing for is really going to happen!"

She hugged me up closer to her.

"Oh, what a Christmas this will be!" she cried. "We are all going to get what we want, all of us, even Rhoda!"

Afterwards she changed. When I went out of the door she drew me back and looked at me anxiously, almost coldly.

"Rhoda, don't tell grandmother anything," she said. "It might be a mistake. I would n't have her disappointed for the world!"

I did not want grandmother to be disappointed, but still when I went back into our house and saw her sitting by the window, I felt that I should like to tell her some good news. Just that once. She looked so frail and old, and

I had never noticed before how white her hair was.

My mother was very tender with grandmother. Every morning she would send her three children, the twins and me, to kiss her, and when my father came home at night she would send him to lean on the back of the big chair, and look down at the closed Bible. Grandmother never took the picture out when my father was there. She never even listened to the people passing by outside. She would talk to him about other things in which neither of them took much interest, until he would go away, half sadly, half angrily.

"She is the most absurd woman who ever lived," he told my mother. "Here is Frank winning laurels by the dozen, and, on account of her stupid prejudice, she won't listen to his name. Does she expect to keep this thing up forever?"

"She is thinking of him all the time,"

my mother said, quietly. "She loves him."

"I know she loves him!" my father cried. "She loves him better than she does me. I was always the one who did n't count! Always."

My mother laid her hand upon his arm and stopped him.

"Hush, Robert," she said.

Her eyes wandered over me sitting on my stool by the fireplace, and passed to little brother Dick playing with his blocks.

"Who can judge a mother's heart?" she questioned, softly, and then turned upon him with a demand that was almost wrathful. "Have you nothing to be thankful for," she cried, "that you grudge him a thought at Christmas time!"

My mother always took grandmother's part. She seemed to understand grandmother better than my father did. Once

I heard her say that the curl in the Bible was like one of little Dick's. She laid it against his soft hair, and it matched, color and curl, as if it had been cut from his head. After that she was even kinder to grandmother than before.

Norah out in the kitchen was the happiest person in the house. Every night she wrote home to Ireland, and sometimes she laughed and sometimes she cried. I liked to hear about Ireland. I would climb upon the kitchen table and watch her write, and listen when she read bits of her letters to me. I knew all about Norah's people, and could call her brothers and sisters, and even her cousins, by name. She was sending money in her letter to buy her mother a new green plaid shawl for Christmas. She was, also, going to buy the priest a pig. Norah was worried about the priest. He gave away everything that he had to the poor of the

parish, and went hungry all the time. After much thought she had decided on the present of a pig, as being a thing which the priest might keep for himself.

"Though they're that owdacious, Rhoda," she cried, in high wrath, "that I'm thinking they'll take the pig, too!"

"What would they do with the pig, Norah?" I asked, anxiously.

"Sure, they might eat it!" she answered, with a dark frown.

"Norah, what if you were to put a blue ribbon about its neck?" I suggested.

She went into fits of laughter and hugged me.

"To think that you've niver even seen a pig!" she cried. "To think of it dressed up! The innocent!"

It was on that same night that with a great parade of secrecy she showed me something hidden in the knife tray.

It was a doll's hat made of blue velvet, and trimmed with lovely white feathers, such as came out of the pillows when Norah thumped them in the morning. Right in front there was a big brass pin that shone like gold. Norah watched me while I examined the hat, breathlessly. She seemed much pleased with my admiration, and turned it around and around on one of her big fingers that I might decide on the prettiest side, which was, of course, the one with the brass pin.

"But whom is it for, Norah?" I asked.

"It 's for a small frind of mine," she explained, with an air of deep mystery.

It was very strange. The dolls and the picture-book, even the hat, were all for somebody's little friend, never for me.

"I wonder what I 'll get?" I said, weakly.

"Why don't you ask Santa Claus, dear?" Norah inquired.

I looked at her quickly. That was Evelyn's friend.

"Who is he, Norah?" I questioned.

She threw up her arms in the air.

"And have I niver told you about him!" she cried. "The quare ould chap that lives up in the chimney!"

"Up in the chimney, Norah! Is n't he hot?" I demanded, in astonishment.

"Faith, there 's no fire could warm him," Norah answered, lowering her voice mysteriously.

Then her finger went up in apparent alarm.

"Hush! He 's listening! He wants to know which are the good byes and gurrls. When Christmas morning comes the good ones will get prisents. For he owns all the prisents in the world! And the bad ones will get nought, barring switches!"

I crept a little closer to Norah, and took a firm hold on her apron. It was very sudden news. Had I always been good?

"But the good childer," Norah went on, with a reassuring smile, "and you are good, Rhoda, have only to ask for whativer they want at the parlor fireplace!"

I could not keep away from the fireplace after that. Every time that I went into the parlor I peeped up the black bricks, and though I never saw anything but the blue sky far, far above, I felt quite sure that he was there. I made little scenes in my mind of the things which I should say to him, and the things which he would say to me, after he became convinced of my goodness. In the meanwhile I was good, oh, so good! and best of all in the parlor. Later, I meant to ask for the queen doll, and the pretty book, and

the little hat trimmed with the white feathers and the beautiful brass pin. Even if he could not give me just those ones, because they were promised, he might give me others. I felt that he could manage it in some way, if he were pleased with me. It was nice to know that he was partial to good girls.

Once I went so far as to speak his name.

"Mr. Santa Claus!" I called, politely, for it was best to be polite. "Oh, please, Mr. Santa Claus!"

A big piece of soot dropped down over the burning wood right at my feet. That was his way of showing that he heard! Then I was frightened, and would have run away but for a sudden sound. Somebody was crying! It was grandmother up in the corner of the sofa with the Bible on her knees. She did not see me at all. She did not know that I was there. I put my arms

around her neck, and she looked up and talked to me quite as if I were a grown person.

"I want him so badly, Rhoda!" she said.

"Who is it, grandma?" I whispered.

"My little boy, Rhoda. He went away and he never came back again. I was not patient enough with him. Always be patient, my dear."

"Don't you cry, grandma," I said. "I 'll get him back, dear grandma, if you won't cry."

She looked at me for a moment as if she almost believed me. I nodded confidently at her. I knew. There was a way, but only little Rhoda had thought of it as yet. If Norah had only told me sooner about Santa Claus!

After she had dried her eyes, and kissed me, and gone to her room, I put my plan into execution. I told Santa Claus all about it up the black bricks.

He did not answer, but the soot fell softly, so I knew that he heard and would remember. It was no longer a question of dolls or books or even hats. I felt that the one thing which I wanted most in the world was just for grandmother's little boy to come home.

I did not hang up my stocking on Christmas eve. The twins hung up theirs, — two little podgy stockings side by side at the mantel-piece. Even quite a small stocking will hold candy, and I have known times when the very nicest present of all would be away down at the toe. My little Susan Sunshine, my littlest doll, came in the toe. I found her after I thought everything was out. I wondered whether Dick or Trixie would find a little Susan Sunshine.

"Why don't sister hang up her stocking?" Dick asked, anxiously.

"Is she bad?" Trixie inquired.

"I 'm not bad," I declared, hastily, from my bed in the next room.

"Why don't you hang up your stocking, dear?" mother questioned.

"I don't want anything," I answered, miserably.

Afterwards I heard her talking to my father.

"I don't know what to make of Rhoda," I heard her say. "She won't hang up her stocking. I hope that she is not going to be sick. It would be dreadful to have one of the children sick at Christmas time. Her head is quite hot."

I felt my head. It was hot.

I lay awake for a long time thinking of things. I considered the twins and their stockings, and grandmother's delight in the morning. Somehow I had to think a great deal about grandmother in order to keep myself from crying. Grandmother did not know

what I was doing for her. The little boy must be getting ready to come right now. Off in the distance I could hear sleigh-bells, perhaps his sleigh-bells, now near, now far away, and in the pauses between the soft throb of the organ over in the church, and a voice singing a hymn, the one that I knew about angels and the manger with the Child. It was very beautiful. I sighed a little, sleepily. After all I was happy.

Then in a moment it was day, bright day, and in the next room there was a confused murmur of voices and a hurried scamper of feet. Dick shouted excitedly. Somebody beat a drum with a low rumble like soldiers, not as a little boy would beat a drum, but as my father might if he were teaching a little boy. Somebody marched pitapat about the room, and somebody danced by the fireplace.

"Go back to your cribs," my mother cried, uneasily. "You 'll get your death of cold!"

On the chair by the side of my bed there was a stocking, with queer knobby places, which meant oranges, and square places, which meant candy. Right on top there was a blue velvet hat trimmed with white feathers, and against the stocking there leant a picture-book. I looked at them incredulously. Santa Claus had not understood! Or else he had thought that I loved my presents better than I did my grandmother! I kissed the hat and the picture-book twice, and then I put them sternly back on the chair. I knew what I should do. Santa Claus would find that I meant what I said.

"Did you like the picture-book, Rhoda?" my father inquired at the breakfast table.

"Yes," I answered, hurriedly.

Norah smiled at me from the shelter of the kitchen door.

"How did my little frind like the hat?" she asked, in a stage whisper.

It seemed to me that there were some subjects which would not bear talking about.

They felt my head a great many times that morning, and even looked at my tongue.

"She acts so unlike herself," my mother said, anxiously. "You don't feel sick anywhere, do you, Rhoda?"

"No," I replied, huskily.

Grandmother evinced a sudden interest.

"I would n't let her go to Evelyn's," she said.

"But I want to go!" I cried, piteously.

"There, there," my father said, in a soothing way. "Of course you may go."

"Only you must take an iron pill

first," my mother pleaded. "Just to please mother."

She did the pill up very neatly in a raisin, so that it did not look at all like a pill. My mother could make the most horrible things look nice,—such as cough syrup, with little specks of jelly floating on it like a pudding. Afterwards you might know by the taste that there had been something wrong, but you could never tell beforehand; not even though you might wonder at dessert being kindly offered for breakfast.

I took my pill meekly, and drank a glass of milk to please my father. Then after much consultation they put on my cloak, and let me go. I had the picture-book and the hat hidden under my arm as I went out the door, but nobody noticed.

Evelyn's house was farther down the street, not quite out of sight from our front gate, but still at a little distance.

There were orphans going in when I came up, — orphans in decorous rows of twos; each little girl with a white apron hanging down under her cloak. They went in very quietly, not at all as if they were excited at the prospect. I felt that they could not know what was inside. I watched to see them dance when they passed the parlor door, but they only stared stolidly.

"A merry Christmas to all of you," a sonorous voice cried within.

I peeped in cautiously. There he was! That was Santa Claus. He stood by a beautiful tree at the top of the room. He had on a white fur coat, and there was a shaggy cap on his head. He smiled at us. It almost seemed that he smiled at me, little Rhoda Harcourt, as if he remembered the chimney! His arms were full of dolls, but I knew at first glance that I could never really

like him. There was something about his face that made it impossible.

"These dolls are only for good girls," he said again, in a loud voice that had a muffled sound.

I slipped in closer. The orphans stared back at him unconcernedly. They were sure that they were good. One, a very sleepy orphan, put her head on her chair, and went fast to sleep in the most impolite way.

"Here, wake up!" the next orphan said, and slapped her.

She woke up and slapped her neighbor back, and was going to sleep again when Santa Claus called her name. It was Betsy. He gave Betsy the first doll. He was evidently quite satisfied with her behavior. I was much surprised.

The dolls went quickly after that, all except the queen. She sat up high on the tree, and her eyes had a frightened look, as though she did not like orphans.

Once Santa Claus took her down, but Evelyn put her back again.

"Not that one, Frank," I heard her cry.

He turned and whispered something to her behind the tree. The branches were very thick, but for a moment I almost thought that his face grew different, younger and fairer, and with a gleam of triumphant laughter about it quite unlike the Santa Claus that he had been before. Then he changed again, and came out, with his long beard flowing and his fierce white eyebrows frowning, to give away more dolls.

At the very end of all he picked up the queen, and called gruffly, "Rhoda!"

I peered out of my corner at the orphans. I could not see any orphan Rhoda among them. Just suppose that Santa Claus should mean me! He did mean me! He beckoned with what he thought was a friendly look.

"Rhoda," Evelyn cried. "Why, you 're not afraid, are you, dear?"

"No," I answered, hastily.

I do not think that she quite believed me, for she took me by the hand and led me up to where Santa Claus stood waiting with the queen in his arms. It was evident that he had forgotten everything, everything that I had ever told him.

"This is for you," he said in a genial way, holding out the doll.

The queen looked at me with delighted eyes, the dear queen! but I could not take her. I gave him the hat and the picture-book in a hurry.

"I don't want these," I said. "You know what I want. I told you up the chimney. And you promised to bring him to me. You know that you did!"

He seemed a little astonished for a moment, and then he laughed.

"Did I?" he questioned. "What

chimney was that? You see I go up so many that sometimes I forget."

"What did you want, Rhoda?" Evelyn asked in surprise, putting her arms around me. "Tell Evelyn."

"I want grandmother's little boy to come home," I answered, almost crying. "The little boy who made the lilac ring. All day long she watches for him. I don't like to see poor grandmother cry!"

There were other things which I might have said, but Evelyn stopped me with a backward glance at the rows of orphans agog on their chairs, and a lady or two who had come with them watching in the background. Even Santa Claus was startled.

"A touch of tragedy," he said. "Who is this child?"

"Can't you guess?" Evelyn whispered. "What was I telling you just now!"

He looked down at me with sudden enlightenment.

"Rhoda!" he cried, uncertainly. "It's not our Rhoda? She was a baby."

"But babies grow in five years," Evelyn replied, in a laughing tone.

He stooped lower and drew me to him.

"Whatever I promised I will do," he said, emphatically. "If you wanted the whole world I would give it to you to-day!"

He threw off the long yellow cloak that was wrapped about him and did something to his face. In a moment he was just a man like other men, and had me upon his shoulder. Somehow it seemed to me that I had been on his shoulder before when the floor was farther away.

"Almost too big for the old perch," he said, with a laugh that was half merry and half tremulous.

"Oh, don't forget her doll!" Evelyn cried.

She came a little closer to him so that she could whisper.

"I honor you for this," she said, ardently.

Then she put the queen on his other arm, and gave me the hat and picture-book to carry. The orphans laughed a little, but Santa Claus did not mind. He strode out into the sunshine with his heavy load, and started up the block. The bells were ringing for service as we went along, and the street was filled with people, but I was the only little girl in the whole town whom Santa Claus took home. And at our parlor window grandmother was looking out.

V
THE HOTTENTOT

V

THE HOTTENTOT

THERE had been a family council in which my relatives had all sat around, gravely, and talked about me and my conduct. It was a painful affair. They had mentioned every bad thing which I had done in the course of a whole week, some of which I had not thought they knew about, and then in the middle of it all grandmother Harcourt had made an announcement.

"Rhoda's behavior grows worse and worse," she had advanced, severely. "And as for her manners, she 's a regular Hottentot!"

"Hottentot, eh?" granddad Lawrence repeated, whimsically.

He had me upon his knee, and as he spoke he turned my face toward his, and regarded it with much apparent interest. I gazed back at him wistfully. He was company, and it was very hard that company should hear me called a Hottentot. I was sure that I did not look like that dreadful name which had suddenly sprung upon grandmother's lips. It had such an awful sound!

"She 's no worse than other children," my mother urged, in defence.

She might blame me herself, but when grandmother Harcourt looked over her spectacles and invented names my mother was sure to grow angry.

"It seems to me that I 've heard about Hottentots before," granddad Lawrence went on, nodding his head. "They 're very fond of candy, Hottentots are, and they like their own way. Yes, they like their own way."

"Not any more than other children,"

my mother said again. "Rhoda gets into mischief solely because she has nothing to do."

"Why don't you send her to school?" granddad Lawrence asked. "She is seven years old."

"Oh, I could n't send her to school!" my mother cried, anxiously.

"No, not yet," grandmother protested, in her turn.

It was the one subject upon which they agreed.

"Well, let her take lessons in something, then. There 's the piano standing untouched. I 've heard of Hottentots who had a very good ear for music."

He pinched my ear as he spoke, and puffed out his cheeks in a funny way, as he always did when he wanted to laugh. He had very little hair on his head, and a round, pink face like a baby's, and a pair of wicked blue eyes that saw everything, both before and

behind him. I had never heard of granddad Lawrence being cross. He was good to everybody, from the little newsboy who ran after him every morning in the street to the stray dogs which selected him for a master on account of his smile. Most of all he was good to us, his grandchildren, and hardly a day passed by that granddad Lawrence did not come walking in to hear the news. There were no children at his own house, for Auntie May was growing into a young lady, and granddad Lawrence liked children, being a child himself at heart, with all a child's love of mischief. But to the friends who trusted in him, he was the soul of loyalty, in thought as well as in word.

When he went home I walked out to the hall door with him, as I always did, and then we had what he called a mercantile transaction. He bent down low, and patted his pocket.

"Don't you want to draw on the bank?" he asked, invitingly.

I ran my hand far into the depths of that jingling pocket. I could have whatever I liked, but the little brass pennies were the prettiest, and the cute little silver ten-cent pieces, which seemed especially made for children.

"Draw again," he said, generously. "Now give the cashier a kiss."

I did not kiss him for pennies. I kissed him for pure love.

"Come again, dear granddad," I said, standing at the door to peep after him. "Come again to-morrow."

He waved his hand to me.

"Good-bye, Hottentot," he called, mischievously.

"Good-bye," I answered, in rather a plaintive voice.

I did not think that I liked my new name.

That was the first occasion on which

I heard of my music lessons, but not the last. My mother seemed to take wonderfully to the idea. She was always discussing the things that she meant us to learn, but up to then we had been too small for any of her plans to be of much importance. To take music lessons was a very simple matter. It could not be considered work, but play on a larger scale; and after I had slipped into the parlor, and touched the piano keys with a timorous finger, I knew that I should like it. The keys were voices. When grown-up people touched them, they sang together beautifully. There was one which was a fairy queen, and one which was a prince, and one away down in the lower bass made me tremble when it talked. That was an ogre. I thought that he might eat little children. I ran out of the parlor in a hurry for fear that he should catch me. Something pattered up the stairs behind me,

and chased me along the hall, but in my mother's room not even an ogre would dare to come.

"She loves music!" my mother cried. "She is always hanging around the piano."

Grandmother looked at me curiously.

"There has never been a musician in our family," she remarked, in a dubious way.

"I played before I was married," my mother answered. "There does n't seem to be any time for it now."

She sighed a little as she spoke.

Her lap was full of pretty new cloth which she was making into dresses, and one of the twins was riding on the rockers of her chair, and one was whistling, shrilly. My mother rocked slowly that there might not be an accident. Most people would have thought that she was only a mother, but at that precise moment she was, also, an express

train coming into a station, and I was a passenger waiting to get aboard.

"I think I 'll get Madame Tomaso to give Rhoda lessons," she said. "We might as well have the best teacher in town. Dad had the best for me when I was a child. It is the first step which always counts."

The whistle sounded again, and two passengers climbed into the rocker behind my mother's back. We were a very tight fit for the chair. She sat a little forward in a meek way, so as to make room for our toes, and rocked more slowly. The train was going uphill carrying a heavy load.

When she was consulted on the subject, Madame Tomaso proved to be very glad to give me lessons. For some reason or other it had been a poor season for her, either because there were only a few little girls musically inclined in the town, or because, which seems more

probable, she had a name for severity. She appeared very amiable, however, the first morning that she entered our house. She drew me to her, with quite a motherly hand, when I came bashfully into the parlor to meet her.

"So this is the small Miss," she said, in a terrifying voice like the ogre's. "And she loves the music? It is well."

She shook hands with me very hard. She had on a dress trimmed with bits of black glass, — I always hated jet afterwards, — and a red silk collar which exactly matched the hearty red in her cheeks. Her hair was black, and her eyes were black. I did not quite like the way that she looked at me. I wondered if she ate little children.

"She is so bright," my mother declared, fondly, pushing the hair back from my forehead. "Stand up straight, Rhoda. You will find that she learns very quickly, Madame Tomaso."

"So?" the ogress answered, in an absent manner.

She was looking at the piano-stool and at me. She was evidently wild to begin, and had not much time to spare for motherly confidences.

"I am afraid that she might fall off the stool," my mother said, hurriedly. "Could n't you use a chair, Madame Tomaso? Though the chairs are rather low for such a little girl."

They made a chair higher with a big book and a sofa pillow, and set me on top in front of the fascinating white keys. The twins were peeping in the door. I looked back at them grandly. I felt very old and important. It seemed almost impossible that only that morning we had been playing express trains together, like children! Still, there was something about it which frightened me, notwithstanding my pride.

"Go away!" I whispered, warningly, to the figures at the door.

They went quickly in evident alarm. Even Dick did not stop for a second look.

"Will she hurt sister?" Trixie asked, in a high voice, as they climbed up-stairs.

Dick peered between the banisters.

"If she does, I 'll shoot her," he declared, stoutly.

I was glad to see them escape, but I did not like it quite so well when my mother followed them, and the door was tightly closed. I had such a trapped feeling. And the pillow was so high that I could not get down without help. Anything might happen! Madame Tomaso yawned a little as she settled down by my side, but she was still kind. She put a paper in front of me which was covered with black scratches.

"Which is 'a'?" she asked, sociably, pointing to a row of things.

"'A' was an Archer who shot at a Frog," I recited, in a timid whisper.

The twins and I had learned that out of a pink book with blue edges. The archer was dressed in red, and the frog was green with yellow trimmings. I could, also, say the catechism from cover to cover, if she would like to hear that, and Who Killed Cock Robin. I had never supposed that anybody but my mother cared for such things. She loved to have us say them to her.

"And 'b'?" Madame Tomaso inquired, staring.

"'B' was a Butcher who had a big Dog," I went on, with growing confidence.

I did not feel nearly so frightened now. She was rather nice. If I were very good, maybe she would not eat me after all.

"Don't you know your letters?" she

demanded, in astonishment. "Don't you go to school?"

"No," I answered, sadly. "I am not strong."

"Ah! Bah!" she cried, in a rude way.

I was sure, perfectly sure, that even a Hottentot would never have said that.

Madame Tomaso taught me my letters that morning, at least the first seven of them, which seemed particularly needed in music. She called for a bottle of ink, and wrote their names on the white keys. She was very patient with me, as I afterwards found out when I was no longer a new pupil to be coaxed along the thorny path. She put each finger where it belonged, and once, when I played five notes without any trouble, she went down through a rent in her skirt which was fastened together with safety-pins, and fished me out a caramel from a hidden pocket. It was very old and hard, and looked as

if it had seen much service, but she regarded me with a benevolent expression while I ate it, and I felt that we had made a good beginning. Take it altogether, I thought that I liked music, and I practiced for hours. It was a great deal of fun when Madame Tomaso was not there, for then I did it all with one finger, which made it much easier. As my feet hung in the air, the twins worked the pedals for me, and my mother would come into the parlor with a pleased smile, and fix the curtains so that I might have a good light.

"That child will surely be a musician," I heard her tell my father, in an eager way. "I've promised her a ring the day that she can play the Träumerei. It may take a long time, but then she practices *so* faithfully!"

My father groaned. I think my mother slapped him.

Of all the family it was, perhaps,

Norah who was the most delighted with my lessons. She took a very friendly interest in them. She always dusted the parlor when I was there practicing, and she would sometimes put down a big finger herself on the piano keys in an experimental way, and jump when they sounded. There was only one thing about my music which worried Norah, and that was the fact that I knew no tunes.

"Sure it 's time that you were learning something," she would say, suspiciously. "Ain't she keeping you back? Can't you play 'The Wearing of the Green' yit?"

"No," I answered, humbly.

"You ought to have an Irish teacher," she said, conclusively. "Madame Tomaso! It 's a cat's name that she has! I never could abide them foreigners."

"Listen, Norah," I urged.

Very carefully, very slowly, with one

finger and infinite pains, I played "Home, Sweet Home" for her. She burst into tears, and throwing her arms around my neck, rocked back and forth with grief. For a moment I thought that I had hurt her feelings, but it was all right. Norah was only homesick for old Ireland. She was paying me the highest compliment that I ever received.

Little by little Madame Tomaso came to treat me differently. The coaxing voice grew gruff, and the black eyes savage. No more caramels came out of the rent in her skirt, and sometimes I almost fancied that she was scolding me! I was very little to be scolded. No one had done that before. I tried harder than ever to please her. I practiced with two fingers, and, at last, even with three, one very heavy in the bass, and two very shaky in the treble. I did not tell anybody about the things which she said, for I was ashamed, but I imag-

ined that granddad suspected. Granddad was always so sharp. It was a wonderful comfort to hide my face on his shoulder, and be petted. He was sorry for me without my saying a single word. He made me draw on the bank every day, and he confided to me all the troubles which he had had when he was a boy.

Once he told me of an awful thing that he did. He puffed out his cheeks before he began to talk, so I knew that it was going to be funny.

"I didn't get on well with a maid my mother had," he said. "Her name was Polly. Did I ever tell you about Polly, Rhoda?"

"No, granddad," I answered, eagerly.

I was leaning against his chair, and we had the parlor quite to ourselves. It was a time for confidences.

"Polly didn't like boys," granddad went on.

"But she liked you, granddad," I asserted, loyally.

He shook his head.

"Polly liked me least of all. She may have had her reasons, but it was her fault in the first place, mind you. When I'd bring home a poor stray dog, she would turn it out to starve! And when I brought home stones, and I was always fond of stones, she would dump them out in the road. I felt that I should like to get even."

I nodded at him. I had felt that way myself.

"So I got a lot of pepper, and one day when Polly was going to sweep I scattered it around the house. I rubbed it well into the carpets."

He scraped his foot over the floor to show me just how he did it. For the moment he looked about ten years old.

"I rubbed it in quite hard. It did n't

show. Nobody could tell that there was anything wrong until she began to sweep. Well, Rhoda, if you could have heard her sneeze, it would have done you good. She sneezed for hours. At first they thought that Polly had a new kind of sickness. They went flying for the doctor; but my mother had noticed me laugh, and she pounced on me. She shook the truth out of me."

He trembled with laughter at the recollection.

"But what did they do to you, granddad?" I asked, breathlessly.

Sometimes his story would have an anticlimax.

"They put me down in the big black cellar," he declared, impressively.

I rubbed my head against his shoulder. I felt that I could never have treated him in that way if I had been his mother.

"Poor granddad," I said, in a consol-

ing whisper. "They were not good to you!"

He puffed out his cheeks, and his eyes shone.

"That depends," he said, cheerfully. "I didn't mind, bless you. We lived in the country, and they kept their pies in the cellar."

"Yes?" I questioned, eagerly.

"That night when they took stock they were short three pies."

"Oh!" I gasped.

I gazed at him in indecision. He looked back at me quite gravely, save for a lurking twinkle in his eye.

"Did you eat them, granddad?" I asked, confidentially.

He nodded.

"And twenty doughnuts," he said.

I regarded him with deep admiration. What a dreadful bad boy dear granddad had been!

I used often to wish that Madame

Tomaso had granddad to deal with. I did not think that she would be so cross, or, at least, she would not show it so openly. She had a trick of frowning until her eyebrows grew together in one thick, black line. She would frown and beat time, and I would chase after her on the piano, with a blur before my eyes, and my heart in my mouth. Sometimes we arrived at a bar together, both out of breath; sometimes she left me far behind, very weak and miserable, with stumbling fingers which refused to hurry. She always beat time with a large black fan, and when the chase proved exhaustive, she would open the fan, and fan herself even in the depth of winter. While she fanned herself she would say things to me, unkind things.

Once she told me about her other pupils.

"I have ten," she said, "ten little girls. Some of them do not make good

music. *I rap them over the fingers with my fan!*"

She went on for quite awhile relating long stories of raps inflicted upon helpless little girls, some of whom had actually been saucy to her, and some of whom had merely played false notes like myself. A much larger girl than I had been rapped that very morning for false notes, and had cried! Afterwards she had played a great deal better.

I listened in growing terror. I wondered if she were trying to frighten me. Then suddenly I glanced up at my great-grandfather's picture.

The parlor walls were hung with the pictures of men who had borne my name. Most of them had preached, but some had fought; and he, my great-grandfather, who looked down over the piano, had preached with a sword in his hand. All the Harcourts had been brave men. They had never been afraid of anything.

And on the other side there was granddad Lawrence, whose courage no one could possibly question. He would not have stood this when he was a boy. Just think of Polly!

Something inside of me seemed to awake. I turned and faced her, ogress though she was.

"You 'll never rap mine," I said, steadily. "Never! I am bad! I am a Hottentot!"

I made a horrid face at her, such as a Hottentot might be supposed to have.

For the first and only time in the course of our acquaintance she laughed. She laughed as if she would die, while I sat on my sofa pillow and watched her. During the rest of the lesson she was remarkably friendly.

My mother was much pleased with the progress that I made. She often spoke of Madame Tomaso's method, and of how brilliantly her little pupils

played. My mother had never heard of raps. All the family were encouraging in their comments, and they, also, set me a shining example. My mother rubbed up her musical knowledge, and even my grandmother would steal into the parlor in the early twilight, and play some Old World melody which held within its tune the hurry of dancing feet. All these I was to learn some day, when my fingers had grown as strong as my desire. I played better and better for the admiring circle, until Madame Tomaso herself would have been astonished if she could have heard me.

"She really does quite well," my father said one night. "It almost sounds like a tune. Is it 'Yankee Doodle,' or 'Old Dog Tray'?"

"Neither!" my mother cried, warmly. "I don't know exactly what it is myself, but it is probably something classic. And she is doing it beautifully!"

"It is 'Yankee Doodle,' mother," I said, in a whisper.

She did not hear me. She was looking at the piano with sad eyes.

"They have taken an awful lot out of it," she said. "It was the first thing that we bought after we were married!"

"Was it?" my father inquired, briskly. "I thought we bought the coffee-pot first. Did n't we fry eggs in the coffee-pot?"

My mother gave him a startled glance.

"We did fry eggs in a coffee-pot," she admitted, reluctantly. "At least *you* fried them. I did not know how."

"Somehow eggs don't taste as good now-a-days as those did," my father said, musingly. "I wonder if it was the coffee-pot."

Grandmother leant over my shoulder, and examined the piano cover.

"What made that, Rhoda?" she demanded, pointing to a broad streak which ran through the plush.

"That is where Madame Tomaso beats time," I answered, meekly.

They looked at one another.

"She is such an excellent teacher," my mother said, apologetically, "that I suppose I ought not to complain. It 's very good of her to take so much trouble. Just as soon as they are large enough, she shall teach the twins, too."

"Oh, no, mother!" I cried, quickly.

"Why not, Rhoda?"

I evaded the question.

"Could n't I teach them, mother?" I asked, anxiously.

They all laughed at me as if I had said something foolish.

It was evident that I should never get rid of Madame Tomaso. She would come year after year, forever and ever, until I and the twins were quite grown

up. The twins were little and easily frightened. She would make them cry. I knew that she would. Sometimes, although I was such a big girl, she almost made me cry, when she beat time and shouted, for she was beginning to shout. And that last scene, though I had been victorious, had rankled. I felt that my mother would be highly indignant if I told her, but somehow I could not tell her. There did not seem to be any way out. I looked at the piano cover, and thought and thought.

"Granddad," I inquired next day, "what became of Polly?"

"Oh, Polly left," he answered.

"Right away, granddad?" I demanded, eagerly.

"Just as soon as she could get her trunk packed. Why?"

I rubbed my head against his shoulder without replying.

He did not ask any more questions, but

he looked at me, keenly. He slipped his hand under my chin, and forced me to meet his eyes. I could never hide my thoughts from anybody. And granddad was always so horribly sharp! He chuckled a little as he gazed at me. When he went away he made me draw largely on the bank, and he patted me on the head.

"Keep up your courage," he whispered. "You 're game!"

Out in the hall I heard him ask my mother a sudden question.

"When does Madame Tomaso come again?" he inquired, suavely.

It was always on Tuesdays that Madame Tomaso came, and it was strange how Tuesdays raced around. That Tuesday, in particular, arrived almost in a moment while I was still thinking. But I had made my preparations.

"You are very careless about the casters, Norah," my mother said at break-

fast. "There is actually no pepper on the table."

"But I filled them last night, ma'am!" Norah cried, staring.

It seemed to me that they all turned and looked at me. I slipped from the room in a hurry. Somehow I felt so queer that morning. I kept sighing, and when the door-bell rang I would get quite cold all over. It rang a great many times before Madame Tomaso came, fresh and alert from her walk, with an air of friendliness which was always sure to disappear later. She turned cross very early that day, even before she had taken off her things.

"I have been too lenient with you, little Miss," she told me, in an awful voice. "We will try a new method."

She seated herself by the piano, and folded her arms. I sat perched on my cushion, and stared at her in fascination. Oh, how I wished that I had let the

pepper alone! Oh, how I wished that I was good! After all it was so pleasant to be good.

"Play," she said, in a masterful manner. "I will be an audience. I will be a great many mens and womens. We will listen to you."

I played. It was very terrible. Her eyebrows grew together. That was the way she would look when she found me out, only worse, much worse. I played faster. She watched my notes, and sometimes she would moan, feebly, as if something hurt her. I played on faster still, one trembling little hand racing ahead of the other, until musical flesh and blood could stand it no longer. She began to count with a shout.

"One, two, three, four!" she cried, and brought the fan down on the piano cover.

Then she sneezed.

"I knew it," she murmured, grimly,

to herself. "I felt it coming on this morning!"

She counted again and sneezed, and I sneezed a little myself in a hurried, guilty way. She looked at me with sudden suspicion. She was sharp, almost as sharp as granddad. In a second she had lifted the piano cover, and found a pile of pepper under that well-worn spot. The things which she said were awful. She said them in three or four languages, and she said them in such a high voice that my mother and grandmother came running in alarm. She pointed at me, with a shaking finger.

"Look at your child," she cried. "She lays traps for me! Pepper traps!"

"Rhoda!" my mother exclaimed.

My grandmother seemed stricken dumb.

I hung my head in shame. I had forgotten how sorry they would be.

She told them all about it. She knew

just why I had done it, and how I had done it. She declared that she would never give me another lesson. No, never! Her voice grew very loud in her denunciation, and the mild words of shocked apology which my mother put in from time to time were swept away in the torrent of her wrath. I saw my grandmother's lip curl, and my mother look astonished. They were judging her by their own standards of quiet reticence and womanly dignity. She was almost justifying me.

Yet before she went she lodged an arrow in my mother's heart.

"As for the child's talent," she cried, and snapped her fingers. "It would be as easy to teach her the tight-rope!"

I heard somebody laugh in the next room. It sounded just like granddad.

My mother and my grandmother went to the door with Madame Tomaso, and saw her out quite as if she were company,

and then they came back into the parlor and gazed at me. They did not seem to know just what to say. It was evident that I had done something dreadful. I began to be frightened. We had a big black cellar, with dark, cavernous recesses where cobwebs swayed about, and dwarfs peeped out at you. I wished that it was night, and I was safe in my bed.

Then somebody shuffled in behind me, and patted my head softly. I looked up into two merry blue eyes.

"Don't you fret, Rhoda," a sympathizing voice said. "Granddad will stand by you."

Even now when he is only a memory I can still feel the thrill of gratitude with which I clung to his protecting hand.

VI

A SOCIAL EVENT

VI

A SOCIAL EVENT

"BUT she has n't any dress!" my mother cried, in consternation. "Only that white Sunday one which is much too short!"

"Let down a tuck," my grandmother said, decisively. "That would lengthen it."

"Oh, do let down a tuck, mother!" I echoed, eagerly.

I had a little pink envelope hugged up close against my apron. On the outside it had "Miss Rhoda Harcourt" written in very large letters, and on the inside it invited me to a party! I was not quite sure what people did at a party; but I knew it must be something delightful, judging from the commotion the

pink envelope made in the family. There was a whirlwind of talk about white dresses, and new slippers, and blue bows, and in the midst of the discussion Auntie May caught up her dress and danced.

"Come here, Rhoda," she called. "This is what they do at a party. Come. I will teach you how."

I braced my back, stiffly, and let her haul me around. This was a serious matter, and must be undertaken with a sober mind.

"She has n't any spring in her," Auntie May exclaimed, ruefully. "Who would think that she is related to me!"

"She does not come of a dancing family," my grandmother replied, with a cold smile. "The Harcourts look after their souls, and let their feet alone."

Auntie May made a wry face. She was my mother's sister.

"Don't shut up like a knife, Rhoda," she said, disconsolately. "Let yourself go. There, I believe the Lawrence side of the family is waking up at last!"

She looked so pretty as she danced in the firelight that I tried to be like her. I copied her courtesies, and followed her steps, and when, at length, she fell breathlessly into a chair, I leaned against her knee with my hand on her pink cheek.

"Auntie May, are you going, too?" I asked, confidentially.

Somehow I thought it would be rather nice to have Auntie May there, just for company.

"Child!" she cried, with a grand air, "it 's a children's party. I am sixteen!"

I felt the rebuke. I was only seven myself, and there were whole centuries between us. It was strange, though, how sometimes Auntie May would play with my dolls, and sometimes she would

tuck up her hair and keep me at arm's length. I never knew which she was going to be — little girl or grown woman.

Auntie May did not live with us, but in another house with a lady who called herself my frivolous grandmother, and curled her hair every day of her life. Grandmother Harcourt wore sober black silk dresses, but this other grandmother liked blue and pink, and even sometimes a gallant touch of red that made her look almost young again. Whenever she looked her youngest, she was greatly pleased, and curled her hair triumphantly. At family meetings the two grandmothers often made those curls the subject for discussion, and oftener still it was my dress and manners which never seemed to suit either of them. One wanted me very quiet and subdued, and dressed in gingham, and the other wanted me very gay and lively, and dressed in

silk. As grandmother Harcourt lived in our house, she had the advantage, and, save for occasional bursts of splendor, I went in great meekness of spirit and dress.

I had thought at first that there was going to be trouble about the party. My frivolous grandmother objected seriously to the idea of that tuck. She seemed to think that I should look very shabby among the other little girls. She spoke of her position, and of the great pleasure that it would give her to buy me a dress.

"Nellie," she urged, almost with tears in her eyes, "let me buy Rhoda a suitable dress. You surely don't want that unfortunate child to go to the Otway's with a tuck let down!"

Grandmother Harcourt did not say anything. I fancy that she must have had it all arranged beforehand, for, after a rather appealing look at her, my

mother declined the offer in a faint, reluctant voice.

I did not care what I wore. I was going to a party. That was enough for me. All the night before I could not sleep, and when, at last, the hour drew near, and I stood before my mother while she gave a final touch to my floating hair, I felt that it was all a dream. It was a dream going down the stairs while the twins, in their nightgowns, peeped after me, and it was a dream getting into the carriage which Auntie May had brought to take me. The very streets were a dream, with little white-clad girls passing in our direction and little boys, with stiff white collars and solemn faces, walking along behind them. And most of all that big house on the hill was a dream, with the lights shining in all its windows, and the rows of Chinese lanterns in the piazza, and a nearby violin letting off cheerful notes of preparation.

"Mrs. Otway is giving this party for the two little grandchildren who are visiting her," Auntie May said, peering out of the carriage window. "They come from the city. They are cousins. You saw them in church on Sunday."

So that was who they were! I felt that I had learned something. Only the Sunday before there had come into the pew before me, first a little boy, and then a little girl, followed by a party of ladies. The little boy sat up in the far end of the pew, just as I did, and he had a high silk hat laid on the cushion beside him, and an elegant cane with a silver head to which he seemed much attached. I never noticed little boys as a rule. I divided them into two classes: boys who walked clumsily, in heavy boots, and glanced sidewise at me, and *bad* boys who made awful faces from behind trees. Never to one of them had I said a single

word. That boy, however, was something quite different. I knew that as soon as I looked at him. He had a light graceful figure, and brave, beautiful eyes. When he gazed over his shoulder and smiled at me, I felt strangely pleased. It was as though some one whom I had known a long time ago had come again.

"Oh, so *he* is Theodore Otway!" I cried, unguardedly, remembering the name on my pink invitation.

Auntie May laughed a whole minute, just about nothing at all.

"You get down here, Rhoda," she said. "Now, remember to shake out your hair the way that I showed you. And don't you get frightened as you always do. Your dress is n't very fine; but there is one thing that is nice about it. It has real lace basted in the neck. Mother put it in. Just fancy, grandmother Harcourt never noticed! Al-

ways give your right hand first in the ladies' chain. You are the only little girl who has come in a carriage. Oh, dear me, I wish that it was n't a children's party! I 'd just love to go in! The lovely, lovely music! What shall you do, Rhoda, if you get very frightened?"

"I 'll shut my eyes, and think that I 'm in church," I answered, soberly.

"Good heavens!" I heard her cry as the carriage drove away, "there 's the other side of the family coming out after all!"

I went up the steps rather breathlessly. There was a big lump rising in my throat, as if I had run miles and miles. I wondered if they would let me in, or if I would have to say what my name was. I was not real sure in my mind that I knew what my name was. Once, years ago, I had been called Rhoda, but Rhoda always went to bed at seven o'clock. This was a new little girl, a fairy child,

who walked under globes of fire straight into fairy-land.

Up, up, I went, past a man with shining buttons who held the door open very graciously for me, past shrubs and flowers banked along the staircase, into a room where there was a great hum of voices. Ever so many little girls, dozens of them, were taking off their hats, and shaking out their skirts, and doing what grandmother called "prinking" before a great glass. I prinked a little myself, following out Auntie May's directions. I thought that I looked rather nice. A woman in a white cap seemed to think so, too. She took a great deal of pains with me, and when the other little girls, who knew one another, went down the stairs in a group, she led me by the hand to the staircase, and showed me where to go.

It was very hard to walk down the stairs alone. I had such a queer feeling,

and I could not see a thing for a mist before my eyes. I went quite slowly, step by step. I could hear the people in the parlor talking.

A lady said, "How pretty!" and a boy's voice cried, "Here she is! Here she is, at last!"

Then in a moment some one was shaking my hand. Little by little the mist cleared from before my eyes, and I saw that I was at the party.

The parlor was a long room, running the whole length of the house, but it looked crowded that night. There were groups of little girls, all those whom I had seen upstairs, and more besides, and lots and lots of little boys who stood in corners and laughed among themselves. There were lights on the walls and flowers everywhere, and the few grown-up people who moved about seemed just as gay and festive as the children. By the door were stationed Theodore Otway

and his cousin, and she had on a lovely pink dress with cascades of little bows falling down her back. All the grown-up ladies seemed to watch her, and when she pranced and shook her bows I heard a lady say, "Paris!" in an awed tone.

There was such a hubbub everywhere that I did not notice at first that a boy, whom I had never seen before, was writing his name on my programme. He was quite a stout boy in tight clothes.

"I 'll take this first one, just to make sure," he said. "Maybe, after awhile, I 'll dance with you again. Don't you forget what I look like."

"No," I answered, humbly.

"That 's right," he continued, patronizingly. "What 's your name?"

I told him in a bashful whisper.

"Well, you want to watch out, and when I holler 'Rhoda' you come where I am. That will be when the music strikes up. Don't forget."

"No," I said again.

"If you are not there, I might take some other girl," he remarked, as a final caution.

Theodore Otway was going by, led by a lady. She was arguing seriously with him.

"Of course you must dance the first dance with your cousin!" I heard her cry. "I told you yesterday that you must. You can ask the little girl some other time."

He gave me a miserable glance as he went to the other end of the room.

I hardly noticed him. I was so worried over the stout boy, who roved about the room, here and there and everywhere. Once he hid behind a sofa, and once he went out in the hall to get a drink of lemonade. He unbuttoned his jacket, and tried to make himself look different by crossing his eyes. I was sure that he did. And, just when the music struck up,

he disappeared altogether! The other little girls all had partners. I was the only one left out. I felt it very keenly.

Suddenly I heard some one shout, "Rhoda!"

I turned around, and there he was behind my chair, where he had been standing all the time.

"Come along," he said, just as if it were my fault, although there was a look of elation about him. "If you don't hurry up, we won't get in the top set. That 's the nicest of all."

I followed him, meekly. I was very glad to find him again, but I felt an inward conviction that I should never get used to boys.

It was not hard to dance. Somehow it was more fun than it had been at home with Auntie May. I always remembered to give my right hand first in the ladies' chain, and when I met my partner I courtesied to him every time. I did not forget

a single thing! The music was very lively, and everybody was smiling, even the grown-up people at the other end of the room who danced and romped among themselves. I thought that I should like to go on forever, back and forth, and in and out in the ladies' chain. I wished that the music would never stop, but it did, at last, with a sudden chord, and we were all ready for something else.

It was a game this time, a strange, new game called "Post-office." It began by a little girl leaving the room, mysteriously, and calling a little boy out into the hall to receive a letter.

"There 's a letter in the post-office for Davie Williams," she cried, in a shrill, high voice that sounded frightened.

All the other little girls laughed. Davie Williams grew very red in the face, but he went out for his letter, and closed the door carefully behind him.

I wondered why he stayed so long, and

what they could possibly be doing behind the door. It was very exciting. Suppose, just suppose, that there should be a letter for me! More little girls went out, and more little boys. The girls tossed their heads, and the boys went quickly, as though to get it over. One boy called out another boy instead of a little girl, and was laughed at. I did not think that I should like to be laughed at. Then Theodore Otway went out and I heard my name.

He was waiting for me with his hands in his pockets.

"Hello," he said, in a diffident way.

"Hello," I answered, shyly fingering my hair.

I looked about for the wonderful something which I had come to see. There was nothing, only the hall and Theodore Otway still with his hands in his pockets. Strange to say he seemed embarrassed. He fidgeted. He talked in jerks.

"I saw you in church," he said, suddenly.

I nodded at him.

"I saw you, too," I confessed, with a shamefaced smile.

He came a step nearer, and hesitated.

"Say," he said, "I don't live in this house when I 'm home."

"No?" I answered, inquiringly.

"No," he replied, seriously.

We were both silent. There did not seem to be anything more to talk about. Still it was rather nice out in the hall.

Somebody rattled the knob. Evidently our turn was over.

"Who 's going to take you out to supper?" he asked, with sudden interest.

"I don't know," I answered.

"Well, let me take you, won't you? You 'd better. There 's a boy here who plays tricks on little girls!"

I shivered. Was it the stout boy?

"Once he made a little girl cry out

loud at a party! You 'd better. Will you? Say yes."

He came a little closer. He put out his hand, and touched my hair.

"It 's like sunshine!" he cried, with a burst of enthusiasm.

I stole a shy glance at him. Nobody had ever told me that before.

"Say yes!" he begged, in a new tone.

"Yes," I whispered, hiding my face behind my hair.

Somebody rattled the knob again. They were growing impatient.

"Well, good-bye," he said, in a hurried way. His hands were back in his pockets.

"Good-bye," I answered.

He went toward the door, then turned again, as if he had forgotten something, and stood thinking.

"Will you give me that?" he asked, pointing to a wee blue bow on my sleeve.

I unpinned it, and laid it in his hand. He fastened it to the front of his coat.

He strutted a little as he went into the parlor. I could see by his smile that he was pleased.

It was my turn now, and I must call a little boy, for that was what all the girls did. I looked in the parlor, undecidedly. There was the stout boy going by with a cheerful wink, and away in the back of the room a nice little fairhaired boy named Eddie was watching me, wistfully. I called Eddie, with sudden fearlessness. He came with a rush, and closed the door behind him. Then he kissed me before I could say a single word! I pushed him away, and began to cry. Even through my bitter tears I could see his astonished face. How was he to know that all my life I had hated to be kissed by strangers. And now by a boy!

"Why, that's the game!" he cried, eagerly. "What did you call me out for?"

"I don't know," I answered, sobbing.

He gazed at me with a worried look. Then he pulled out a fat, white lozenge from his vest pocket, and offered it to me.

"Here, take that," he said, generously.

I examined it through my tears with strong disfavor. It looked like medicine. Still I did not want to hurt his feelings. I ate it with misgivings.

"That 's right," he said, radiantly. "They are good for sore throat. My father takes them. Don't you feel better now?"

"Yes," I answered, with a weak smile.

It was evident that in his way he meant to be kind, and, perhaps, after all the lozenge like the kiss might be a part of the game.

They were dancing in the parlor when we went back, and the fun was growing loud and furious. One little girl was singing, rapturously, as she danced, and

two little boys were sliding in a corner. There was talk of supper. Somebody, peeking through a keyhole, had seen pink ice-cream, and had come away dazzled. The great hour was drawing near, and little boys were going about looking for their partners. Up at the end of the room Theodore's mother was talking to him.

He came to me afterwards, with a crest-fallen air:

"Say," he said, "I can't take you out to supper. I have to take my cousin. She says so."

He looked back over his shoulder, threateningly.

"What she says now, goes. When I'm a man things will be different. Ain't you sorry I can't take you out?"

"Yes," I confessed, candidly.

He seemed to be glad that I should be sorry.

"He 's going to take you out," he continued, with a jealous nod at the stout boy. "She asked him to."

I did not want to go with the stout boy. Every time that he looked sidewise at me I felt a sudden fear. Suppose that it should be a trick! Suppose that he should think of something new to do right now! When the inspiring march began, however, and we all fell into line, each little girl on the arm of her partner, I forgot everything in my excitement, and grew almost reconciled.

We passed solemnly around the parlor three times, and then swept across the hall into an opposite room. In the center of the room there stood a beautiful table, and the woman in the white cap, who was the only grown person in sight, was serving out pink ice-cream. The little girls sat on chairs about the walls, and the little boys brought them plates full of goodies from the table. There were

lovely things which I had never seen before, much too pretty to eat, and almost too fragile to touch. And over the whole room there fell the soft light of candles.

"Do you like ice-cream?" the stout boy asked, when he had seen me settled in my chair. "I tell you what I 'll do. I 'll pick out all the things that I like."

He was a wonderful provider. I could see him heaping up my plate, and he always seemed to take the best of everything. No other girl was going to have such mammoth slices of cake as I, and he had a perfect pyramid of candy in his hand. I knew that I could never eat it all, no, not a half. Somehow he did not seem able to find me afterwards. I beckoned to him, but still he turned aside, and went toward a far corner. He was sitting down! He was going to eat the things himself! Was it a trick? I looked

down hard in my lap. Never, no, never, should he make *me* cry out loud at a party!

I heard a sudden sound of wrath. I turned around just in time to see Theodore Otway tip the stout boy over on the floor, and sit on him. He seemed to be very angry. He pounded the stout boy. I was almost afraid to look. The woman in the white cap left off serving pink ice-cream, and made a dreadful outcry.

"Oh, Master Theodore," she cried, wringing her hands. "Oh, Master Theodore! You must n't do that! It 's not polite!"

A little boy cheered faintly, and in the next room, where the older people were having their supper, there was a hurried consultation. Then Mrs. Otway came in.

"What is all this?" she asked, in astonishment, looking as if she could not believe her eyes. "Theodore!"

She caught him by the arm, and dragged him up in a hurry.

"For shame!" she cried. "What a way to treat your company! I 'm going to put you right straight to bed."

A shudder ran around the room, and we all looked at one another in horror. To be put to bed at a party! There was a disgrace.

"I don't care," Theodore retorted, recklessly, with tears in his eyes. "I 'd do it again any day. He 's a greedy pig!"

I stole up and slipped my hand in his. Somehow I did not like to see him cry.

"He was eating that little girl's supper," a chorus of eager little boys explained. "He was eating it all up!"

"I was n't either," the stout boy declared, hastily. "I was only pretending." He dusted off his knees, and

looked around the incredulous circle. "I tell you I was only pretending. I was going to bring it to her all right afterwards."

Nobody believed him, not even I, for had I not seen him eating the pink ice-cream?

"You had better come with me," Mrs. Otway said, laughingly. "Come. You can finish your supper in the next room."

It was very pleasant after she had taken him away. Every one was so good to me. There were lots of nice things left on the table, and Theodore filled the largest plate that he could find. Other little boys stood around to watch me eat, and gave me presents. One gave me his jackknife, and one gave me a penny which he had brightened to gold by rubbing it on the carpet. When we went back in the parlor there were dozens and dozens of little boys who wanted to dance

with me. I could not tell whom to choose. Then, in hardly a moment, Auntie May looked in the door, and I knew that the party was over, and I must go home.

I told Theodore good-bye last of all.

"Good-bye," he said, slipping a little brass curtain-ring on my left hand. "I 'm coming back when I 'm a man. Then we 'll get married, and live in a house. And I 'll shoot rabbits for dinner. Would you like that?"

"Yes," I answered, promptly.

He surveyed me for an anxious moment. Our heads were very nearly on a level.

"Don't you grow too tall," he cautioned.

"No," I promised, and was half-way to the door, when he caught me again by the hand.

"If anybody makes you cry," he whis-

pered, ardently, "you write to me, and I 'll come back."

I gave him a grateful smile. I knew that he would.

Auntie May said very little as the carriage rolled along, but when, at last, we reached home, she swept me in before the assembled family.

"There were ten little boys telling her good-night," she cried, breathlessly, in a voice divided between awe and delight. "Ten little boys! Just fancy! Our Rhoda! She was a great success. She was the prettiest one there."

My mother put out a tender hand and drew me to her.

"And did you have a good time at the party, Rhoda?" she asked, eagerly. "A real good time, little girl?"

I looked around the listening family circle. They were all watching me. Yes, even my father over his paper.

"I don't know," I answered, bashfully.

"Of course she did n't," grandmother cried, nodding her head triumphantly. "Of course she did n't. She 's a Harcourt all over."

I looked down at my little brass ring. I felt that grandmother was wrong.

VII

AUNTIE MAY

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AUNTIE MAY

ALWAYS when I think of Auntie May, I remember sunshine, and the wind blowing, and a lilac bush in purple bloom by the garden gate. We were standing there together, very quiet and confidential, she, tall and slim, and I a little girl who liked to cling to her hand. We had on our best white dresses, for it was Sunday, and her church service was white and violet, and mine was white and gold. We had parasols just alike, and we stood waiting until the first boom rang out from the big bell in the church tower far down the street.

"Now we will go," Auntie May said.

She opened the garden gate, and we passed out, very demurely.

It was seldom that I went into the big world; but when I did I enjoyed it so! The parasols cast a pleasant shade, and I had a big five-cent piece in my right hand that meant church, and another clutched tightly in my left that meant Sunday school. There were other family parties to be met on the street, elderly ladies carrying Bibles, and little girls and boys walking with careful precision, and down near where the big bell boomed there was another church which commenced after ours did where Burton Raymond played the violin. I could not remember when I had not known Burton Raymond and his violin, for they were one person.

"When Burton Raymond goes to bed," I had heard my mother say, "he always puts the violin to bed, too."

"In a bed, mother?" I demanded.

"No. In a box by his bed, wrapped in his pocket handkerchief, poor fellow."

It was after this time that Auntie May embroidered an oddly shaped velvet mat quite secretly. It had forget-me-nots on it, and when it was finished she tied it up in a beautiful white paper, and slipped it in the mail box down at the corner. And, once, months afterwards, when Burton Raymond played one evening at our house, he put his violin to bed in a velvet jacket just like the one which Auntie May had made.

We were great friends. When we met down by the church steps he would call to me, cheerfully.

"Good-morning, Rhoda."

"There he is, Auntie May!" I would cry. "Don't you see him? Look, Auntie May!"

Somehow, or other, although he never called to her, I always wanted her to see him, too.

He looked very pleasant in the bright sunshine. His hair was nicely brushed,

and his shoes were blacked. There was a patch on his right elbow; but you could not see it unless you looked closely. There was something noble in the way in which he carried his dark head. Somebody, perhaps it was Norah, had told me that one of his ancestors had been a great lord, back in the days when the lords were crusaders, and I liked to think of Burton Raymond in chain armor killing people, recklessly. Little Dick and I used to act it out sometimes in the dark end of the hall. We killed a number of things there, Saracens, and lions, and tigers, and the rocking-horse, and little Trixie, and would come in quite breathless afterwards to the sitting room where the family sat in the lamplight. Sometimes we found them talking about Burton Raymond.

"Every time that I walk down our block I seem to meet Burton Raymond," my father grumbled, one evening. "It 's

getting to be a nuisance. Especially since May has been visiting here," he added, after a serious moment's pause.

"He passed the house fifteen times today," my mother said, quietly.

She said it with a blush, and then, suddenly, she made an impulsive dive at my father's hand and squeezed it.

"We were young ourselves once!" she cried.

"The lad has n't a cent to bless himself with," grandmother demurred.

"But he has genius!" my mother cried again. "There is a great future opening before him. And when we were married we had very little, Robert. There was just one small twenty-five cent piece left after the wedding trip. Do you remember, Robert? And you spent it in flowers — for me! They were roses. I have some of them dried yet."

My mother's voice had sunk lower and lower, falling almost into a whisper, as

it always did when she was greatly moved. Sometimes I used to fancy that my mother was not so clever as my father. He could add up sums for you, and tell you about the presidents, and who were the greatest generals in the world; but my mother knew quite different things, the kind that stay with you forever. To her life was a poem and a dream. She was her happiest when she could help somebody, so that for any one to be poor, and very unfortunate, was an open sesame to her heart.

I heard a good deal about Burton Raymond that night, and when I went to bed I asked a sudden question, staring with wide open eyes at my mother over the white coverlet.

"Mother, how poor is Burton Raymond?"

She was taking away the light; but she came back again.

"He is so poor," she said, dramati-

cally, "that he lives in a garret room at Widow Denton's. It is quite a cold room, without a fire, and the bed is not soft like yours, Rhoda. He has a few books on the end of the shelf by his violin box. He plays whenever he can get a chance. Sometimes, perhaps, he is hungry! Yes, sometimes he is hungry!"

I shivered.

"But it's no sin to be poor, is it, mother?" I demanded, anxiously. "We can love people who are poor?"

She put down the light on the bureau before she answered me.

"Money never bought the real things of life," she said, slowly. "To be good and true is the greatest of all. It is sincerity that counts. And when we see some one very noble, and very poor, we must help them, and love them always. Yes, love them always!"

She gave me a sudden kiss, and took the lamp away.

I lay staring into the dark. I could see that garret room, and the violin on the shelf, almost I could see Burton Raymond walking around, very cold and poor, perhaps; but so lovable, yes, so lovable, that poverty seemed the very highest distinction. I made up a long story about him all by myself. He had a great fortune left him, and grew into a lord again, and married Auntie May long before I went to sleep.

But there was another side to the picture.

"It 's the cheek that himself has to be coming after our young lady," Norah declared. "A lad out of a butter and eggs shop! Is it fitting for the likes of him to lift his eyes to her?"

"Who, Norah?" I asked, breathlessly.

She was washing clothes with her sleeves rolled to the elbow. First her hands went down into the water with a rush, and then they came up again, and

she rubbed something white on a board, amid a snowy froth of suds that was good to look upon. Norah was an authority on washing, and she was, also, an authority on love. Sometimes she would toss back the stray locks from her face, and sing as she scrubbed with a naïve abandon that would bring grandmother to the scene in a hurry:

"I 'm jist siventeen,
And I 've niver had a beau."

Norah sang at the top of her strong voice accenting each line with great enjoyment.

"Is there any gint will have me?
Ah, don't say no!"

The last phrase was coaxing in the extreme, and I might have been properly impressed if I had not known that Norah was quite old, twenty-five almost, and that down in the very bottom of her trunk there was the picture of a wild Irish

lad whom she had loved and left in the old country. Sometimes I used to dream that he would come to America, too, and get rich notwithstanding his wildness, and find Norah out, and, just suppose, he might make a great lady out of her! Life was full of such glorious possibilities in those days!

But to go back to the story.

"Why it 's Burton Raymond," Norah explained, in disconnected jerks. "And his uncle keeps the shop. A small, dark shop with eggs in the window. And there 's mice under the counter, the freshest mice that I 've iver seen. It 's like household pets that they be! And Burton waits on the customers. And at night he fiddles to himself. But there 's no money in fiddling. Sure I knew a lad in Ireland wance that fiddled for tuppence a night. And he died of starvation, and wint to glory, rest be to his sowl."

She stopped to hold up a small wet garment with indignant hands.

"How did you iver git them black stains?" she demanded.

"I don't know, Norah," I answered, meekly.

After that I was divided in spirit about Burton Raymond. There was the part of me that gloried in the crusader, and even found something romantic in starvation, and the other part that winced at the butter and eggs shop.

The lovers were very pretty to watch. Burton Raymond went up and down our street a great many times every day, and Auntie May always seemed to be out in the garden looking at the flowers. She was growing tall herself, like one of the plants. All her soft hair was gathered upon the top of her head, and she never ran about as she used to do. She had forgotten how to be a little girl. She changed her dress a great

many times a day, and she bought a band of velvet ribbon to wear around her throat, and sometimes she would catch me in a dark corner, and hug me, rapturously.

"The saints preserve me from iver being in love!" Norah cried, shaking her head. "What will the owld gintlemin say? And the owld lady?"

The old gentleman was my granddad Lawrence, who lived around the corner in a big house that outshone ours as the sun does the moon. There were more flowers there and more trees, and a fat horse in the stable that drew a little dog-cart about the streets of our town, and best of all there was a fountain in the garden, where two little iron boys stood under an iron umbrella, and watched the birds that came to take their baths in the pool at their feet. Just now, however, the house was all closed up, granddad and grandmother were away, the fountain in

the garden was quite choked and dusty, and the birds had found another place to bathe.

Grandmother Lawrence was my worldly grandmother, and when she was at home we tried to live in as good style as possible that she might be pleased with us. Always it had been a sorrow to her that my mother had married a poor man, and she was quite resolved that no such catastrophe should happen to Auntie May.

"I would rather see May dead," I have heard her declare dramatically, "yes, dead at my feet, than married to a poor man!"

She never said this when my father was around; but he knew as well as the rest of us that Auntie May was destined for great things.

She was so pretty, Auntie May was. Sometimes she let me stay in her room when she did her hair before the glass,

and I would handle its soft lengths fondly.

"Auntie May," I asked once, peeping over her shoulder into the mirror, "may I be your bridesmaid?"

First she flushed up and laughed, and then she leaned back in the chair, and gazed at me, wretchedly.

"Rhoda," she said, "I am the most miserable girl in the whole world!"

That was the day that grandmother and granddad Lawrence came home, and there was a stir all through their big house and our little one, and Auntie May was back in her own room, surrounded by all the pretty things that were particularly hers. She looked around it, consideringly. There were roses on the carpet, and roses on the big arm-chairs, and roses climbed up the walls and fell in festoons about the ceiling. There was a white fur rug in front of the fire-place, and a silver glitter on

the bureau. Auntie May looked at it all in quite a discontented fashion.

"I like things plainer," she said, plaintively.

Her lip trembled.

"I 'd like a garret — and bare floors — and music!" she cried.

"What is that about music?" grandmother Lawrence questioned, coming in the door.

She had a string of pearls in her hand, and she fastened it around Auntie May's throat as she spoke. It was a present brought from abroad.

"There, child," she said, not unkindly, "wear your pearls and be happy, and don't let us have any more of this nonsense."

"Nonsense!" Auntie May exclaimed.

"Yes, nonsense," grandmother Lawrence repeated, coldly.

Auntie May's eyes flashed.

"Do you think you can pay me to

give him up?" she asked, in growing indignation. "Do you think that I care about pearls? Do you think that I care about anything — but just him?"

She had risen to her feet, and was confronting grandmother.

"Let me be happy in my own way," she pleaded, with soft appeal. "Mother, let me be happy!"

I thought that for just a moment grandmother weakened; but it was only for a moment.

"Happy with a beggar!" she retorted. "Never!"

The pearls went down on the floor in a sudden shower.

"Then I 'll never be happy in all my life!" Auntie May answered, in a broken voice.

After that it seemed as if there was a heavy cloud over the whole family. We were none of us as cheerful as we used to be, not one, and people spoke in whispers

as they do when some one is very sick. And Auntie May cried! She cried until her pretty eyes were red, and all her soft hair was tousled and damp from much mourning. And my mother cried with her. It was a terrible time.

We children had talked the matter over among ourselves, and we all sided with Auntie May. Every night little Dick prayed an extra clause to his long prayer. It came right after the place where he prayed for puppies.

"Please, God, let me have two puppies," he asked, in a loud, decided tone. "One brown one, and one white one with brown spots and a brown tail. And, please, God, bless Auntie May, and send her a new beau."

One night he made another announcement.

"Please, God, you need n't bother about Auntie May's beau. When I grow up I 'll marry her myself."

"You shan't!" little Trixie cried, in sudden wrath, from the next crib. "When I grow up I 'm going to marry her *myself*."

She bounced in her bed.

Dick answered her from his knees. He looked like an angel as he knelt there in his nightgown, with his fair curls falling about his flushed face.

"Girls can't marry girls," he explained, scornfully.

"They can!" Trixie screamed.

"They can't!" Dick roared.

He picked up one of his little shoes by the side of the bed, and threw it at Trixie. There was an immediate wail from the next crib. Dick was always a good shot.

"Oh, children, children!" my mother cried, in despair. "Dick, go to sleep this moment. Trixie, Trixie, dear, you are not really hurt."

"But her feelings are, mother," I protested.

I knew that the littlest things hurt just as much as the big.

My mother settled down, disconsolately, in her rocking chair, with a small, weeping burden in her arms, and rocked and sang.

"This is a dreadful family," she said, in between verses. "There is always a fuss."

As for Dick he made one more triumphant discovery before he finally subsided for the night.

"Girls are soft things," he declared, jealously, from his crib. "They are! They are!"

"Dick!" my father called from downstairs, "you stop that!"

Which settled the subject for the time being.

There was just one person in the family who was not upset, and that was my grandmother Harcourt. She read her Bible as usual, and watched us with

grave eyes. She watched grandmother Lawrence buying pretty dresses by the dozen for Auntie May, and scolding violently, because they were not worn, and she watched granddad going about, with a perplexed face and a heavy heart, and even my own father laboriously concocting funny stories at which nobody laughed. When grandmother spoke her remarks were oracular.

"Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder," she said, with dignity.

And one day when things were at their very worst, and Auntie May had come to our house, "to cry in peace," as she said, grandmother Harcourt laid a small white note in her hand.

"Go out in the garden, dear," she said, impressively. "Behind the lilac bush. Quick!"

Away flew Auntie May, and I after her.

Now behind the lilac bush was my own particular domain. It was where I made my little mudpies in beautiful clam shells, and once I had had a caterpillar colony there, all pretty brown and yellow ones, and some few with neat tufted backs and red whiskers. And Jeremiah John, the wandering turtle, lived there. But no grown-up person ever ventured behind the lilac bush, so it was a surprise to find Burton Raymond, with cobwebs on his coat and a pale face, waiting for us.

"You!" Auntie May cried.

She said it almost in a shriek. She put her arms about him and clung to him.

"You!" she said again, with infinite content.

They did n't appear to mind me in the least, and they nearly killed Jeremiah John, who had gone to sleep in the sun.

Burton Raymond had seemed frightened at first; but when he saw how

Auntie May cried and clung to him, his head went up, and his eyes grew dark, and he looked every inch a crusader. They talked together in whispers. He was persuading her to do something.

"Oh, no, no!" she cried.

She looked down at her clothes.

"What! In this dress!" she exclaimed, hotly.

He whispered again, and little by little she stopped shaking her head, and grew a trifle rosy and confused, and, at last, it seemed to me that she said, "yes." It must have been something very terrible to which she had agreed, for she faltered afterwards, and had to be encouraged some more. Then she picked a bunch of the lilacs and pinned it in her belt, and they went on toward the gate together. Her hand was on the latch before she remembered me.

"Oh, there's Rhoda!" she said.

Her eyes questioned mine, anxiously.

"Will you come, too, Rhoda?" she asked.

Somehow I felt that she would be glad to have one of the family with her, so I went.

Of course I knew that it was an elopement. Auntie May was running away, just like a princess in a fairy tale! I knew whole pages and pages of fairy tales, and I had always liked the ones best where the princess ran away; but I had never expected to be in a fairy tale myself. The sun was so bright, and the air was golden with mystery. The gate shut with a soft click. I felt that it would never betray us. It was very exciting afterwards. We turned around a corner, and there was a horse and buggy waiting for us in quite a magical fashion, and in a moment we were in and off.

"Oh, make him go fast, Burton," Auntie May prayed.

She was frightened again.

"Oh, make him go very fast!" she cried.

The houses whisked past us. The people in the streets looked at us, strangely, and one old man, a lifelong friend of my grandfather's, ran out to the curb, and held up his cane, imperatively, for us to stop. On we went, with a clatter and a bounce, right through the town, and out into the quiet country beyond, where there were daisies in the fields, and cows to regard us with astonishment, and dogs to bark as we went along. We were all quite pale by now, I fancy, and wild-eyed. At least the prince and the princess were, and they held hands as if they had been lost and had found each other. And, then, away off in the distance I saw the steeple of a tiny church. It grew taller and taller.

Always when I had thought of being

Auntie May's bridesmaid, I had expected to wear a white dress and carry flowers, and walk right down the aisle with all the golden and red and blue ladies in the church windows watching me; but now when the time came I concluded that I liked this new way best of all. The minister was out in his front yard when we drove up, and I thought that he looked at our bridal party rather pityingly. And I also thought that he considered us a joke. We walked up to him trembling, and stood about the bed which he was digging.

"We'd like to be married, sir," Burton announced, awkwardly.

The minister regarded us all through big, benevolent, silver-rimmed spectacles. He left off his digging to smile at us. He had a geranium in one hand, and a shovel in the other.

"I thought you were a christening party," he said.

He pointed his shovel at me.

"Who 's that?" he demanded, beaming.

"I 'm the bridesmaid," I told him.

Then I felt a sudden confidence in him. I pulled at his sleeve.

"They 're running away," I confided, anxiously. "Won't you marry them? If you don't poor Auntie May will never be married at all!"

"We 've only got a few moments' start, sir," Burton explained, breathlessly. "There 's a carriage after us. Listen!"

Far in the direction of town we could hear the sound of coming wheels. While we listened they seemed to redouble their speed.

"Oh, if you 'd please hurry, sir!" Auntie May begged, in a panic. "They 'll take me home again! I know they will. Oh, what shall I do! What shall I do!"

She looked about with wild eyes as though for somewhere to hide.

The minister himself seemed to catch fire a bit at that, and he did hurry. He had us all in the parsonage parlor in a moment, and went off upstairs calling for "Dora." He was back again immediately in his surplice, with his wife following him, and there, standing before a sunny window, the wilted lilacs still pinned in her belt, Auntie May became Mrs. Burton Raymond.

She looked so pretty! Her eyes were full of tears, and her cheeks were pink. She trembled a little still from agitation. After it was all over she turned to Burton, and held out her hands to him in a frightened way.

"You 'll be good to me?" she questioned.

"Good!" Burton cried, with his arms about her.

He looked as if he could dare the whole world in her defense.

"If he is n't he 'll have to answer to me," the minister declared, stoutly.

"And to me!" another voice cried, irately, and there was granddad Lawrence stalking, unexpectedly, into the room.

He was very much out of breath, and very angry. I don't believe that I ever saw granddad Lawrence so angry before. For one moment I thought that he was going to shake Burton; but after a bit he calmed down, and we all went home together, the bridal couple in their buggy in advance, and granddad and I behind in the dog-cart. Granddad seemed very sorrowful, and, at last, he unburdened his mind to me.

"This is all very well, Rhoda," he said, in a rueful fashion. "But who 's going to break the news to your grandmother!"

He took off his hat, and rumpled up

his gray hair until it stood up like quills all over his head.

"Who 's going to tell *her?*" he asked, blankly.

It worried us both all the way home; but the question was settled in quite an unexpected manner, for it was grandmother Harcourt who went to tell grandmother Lawrence. She put on her best black silk, and her lace veil, and her cameo pin, and she held up her head very high in the air as she went out of the front gate.

"I shall tell her a few wholesome truths," she said, determinedly. "I shall speak as woman to woman."

"It is really not so bad after all," my father told my mother. "They talk of a concert tour for the boy, and he comes of a good old family, if it *has* fallen on evil times."

He paused for a moment, his eyes searching the future.

"And if your father runs for mayor —I don't say that he will, but if he should be persuaded to run — why, that story would bring him in a great many votes. It 's so pretty and romantic. All the world loves a lover you know."

My mother sighed blissfully, and motioned to him to peep in the parlor door.

There in the darkest corner sat Auntie May and Burton Raymond on a sofa together. They sat and looked at each other for hours and hours and hours.

VIII
THE GREEN DOOR

VIII

THE GREEN DOOR

"Of all the childer I 've iver seen he 's the worst," Norah cried. "He 's as sharp as tacks, and as bad as a young magpie."

She had come into the sitting room, and stood regarding my mother at her sewing.

"What is the matter, Norah?" my mother demanded, anxiously.

"It 's Dick, ma'am. What else should it be? Ain't I been after making a grand gingerbread for your lunch? And ain't he under your own bed this blessèd moment?"

She paused for breath, almost crying, and wringing her hands.

"He's eating the whole of it!" she exclaimed.

"What, a whole gingerbread?" my mother repeated, evidently startled.

"Yes, ma'am. I've been poking at him with a broom; but it's no use."

There was a quick procession up to my mother's room, my mother leading it, with her head thrown up in wrath, then little Trixie and I hand-in-hand, and Norah following behind us to see justice done. The room was dark and orderly; but there was a curious shuffling sound under the bed.

"Dick!" my mother cried. "Come out of there! Dick! Do you hear what I say? Richard!"

When my mother said "Richard" things were apt to be pretty serious.

Little Dick crawled out from under the bed very reluctantly. He was red and sticky; but he had a happy ex-

pression as if he had been having rather a good time. He brought a tin plate with him, and it was quite empty. There was not even so much as a crumb in it. My mother looked at him in horror, and grandmother, who had been attracted by the noise, looked at him, too, over my mother's shoulder, with strong disapprobation.

"If he were my son," she said, distinctly, "I'd give him a good thrashing. He richly deserves it."

It was a dreadful moment. Little Trixie and I stared at the scene fascinated, while my mother wavered between justice and mercy. When she finally spoke her voice was very cold and severe.

"I don't know what I ever did to have such a son," she said. "After this I am not going to be his mother any longer. I shall call him Master Richard, as if he were a stranger, and

he shall call me Mrs. Harcourt. Nothing else."

Trixie and I held each other closer. It was a terrible sentence. To be a stranger in one's own home! And not to have any mother! Little Dick's red, childish cheeks paled, and he looked frightened. He made a hurried movement forward, and caught hold of my mother's dress.

"Oh, mother!" he cried, beseechingly.

"Go away, Master Richard," she commanded. "I am not your mother."

"Oh, please, Mrs. Harcourt," Dick wailed. "Oh, please, Mrs. Harcourt, let me call you mother!"

But my mother was inexorable. She pushed away his hands, and walked out of the room, leaving him behind. They all went away, she, and grandmother, and Norah, and even little Trixie. I was the only one who remained.

I was very sorry for Dick, and I wanted to hug him badly. But I did not quite dare. Dick never liked anybody to hug him, and it was very seldom that he cried. He dug his fists into his eyes for a moment, and then he took them away, and looked at me, gloomily.

"All right," he said. "If she ain't my mother I ain't her little boy!"

Then he walked into the next room which was his own, and went down into the bottom bureau drawer, and got out a box with a red lining. In it was his Waterbury watch. That was the most valuable thing that Dick possessed. He always took it to bed with him at night, and he wound it up in the mornings, and sometimes, when he did n't mean to play very hard, sometimes he wore it. He put it on now, and he put two clean handkerchiefs in his pocket, and his knife, and a red ball, and the knob off the machine drawer, and two rubber

bands, and a wish-bone, and the little box out of a doll that makes her cry, and the stopper of a cologne bottle. And he opened his missionary box, and fished out ten pennies, — the ones which he was saving to educate a native child in India. When I saw that I knew that things were very serious. I went up close to him and touched him.

"Dick," I said. "Dick! What are you going to do? Oh, Dick!"

I said it timidly, for although little brother Dick was only six, and I was nine, he was nearly as big as I was. And he was always masterful. But he did n't repulse me this time, so I kissed him on his ear, and rubbed my head against his shoulder, just to let him know that I loved him. Somehow I thought that he would like to be loved just then. And wonder of wonders he rubbed back!

"When I come home —" Dick said. "When I 'm a rich man, sister, I 'll buy you some nice things. I 'll buy you some candy, and a pretty dress. And I 'll buy you some guinea-pigs! I guess you 'd like to have some guinea-pigs, would n't you, sister?"

I did n't care a rap for guinea-pigs, but I nodded at him just to comfort him. I felt that I should like an elephant if Dick bought it.

"And we 'll build a nice house for them in the backyard," Dick went on, evidently cheering up at the prospect. "Under the walnut-tree. And there 'll be fathers and mothers and sisters and brothers, and little weany, weany ones, all white and pink!"

"But where are you going, Dick?" I demanded.

His face fell.

"I 'm going through the Green Door," he said, doggedly.

"Oh!" I breathed, in alarm.

Now there was a long, high fence behind our house where the morning-glory vines climbed up and still up, and then fell in beautiful showers of purple and pink blossoms, and just in the very center of the fence where the vines were the thinnest there was a door, — a bright, green door, with a massive lock, and a huge key, and two great iron hinges. None of us children knew what lay on the other side; but there was something secret-looking about that door, as if it might lead into Bluebeard's house, or out into fairy lanes and meadows. Once, a good while ago, little Dick had climbed up to the top and looked over. Then he came down again in a scramble.

"What did you see, brother?" I quavered.

"The black people!" he replied, in a whisper.

He caught hold of my apron, and

we both stood listening. It seemed to me that I could hear some one singing in the distance, a queer, elfish sort of a song, and once a step passed along outside the gate, — a loitering step.

"Run, sister, run!" Dick cried.

He caught me by the hand in sudden panic, and we both fled back to the house together, and we never went near the Green Door for whole days and days.

I remembered all this now, and I felt sorry for Dick. I think that Dick felt sorry for himself, for he looked around the bedroom almost wistfully when he went away. And he did n't slide down the banisters as he usually did, but walked downstairs, step by step, very slowly, and paused by the sitting room door. My mother was talking inside in quite a happy fashion. There was the buzz of the sewing-machine, and a murmur of conversation between her and

grandmother, and once when she came to the end of a seam, once the machine stopped, and my mother laughed. When Dick heard that he went on down the hall with his head up; but he came to a halt in the dark corner to hug the hobby-horse, and he cut off a bit of its white mane, and put the piece carefully away in his pocket. Dick was always very fond of the hobby-horse.

"Good-bye, old fellow, good-bye," he said. "Don't forget me, Alcibiades."

Alcibiades pranced a little, but he did not say anything.

I was the one who spoke. I had been feeling pretty bad for sometime; but now I could n't stand it any longer. To see dear little brother Dick go out into the world alone! Never to have any brother any more! I threw my arms about him from the other side of the hobby-horse.

"Dick," I cried, tearfully. "Oh,

please, Dick, don't go away! Take me with you, won't you, Dick?"

"Will you go, too, sister?" Dick demanded, eagerly.

I nodded at him.

"We won't never come back," he cautioned.

I stole a look down the hall, the dear, familiar hall.

"All right, Dick," I said, with a gulp.

Nobody noticed us as we slipped down the path to the Green Door, not even Norah, who was singing in the kitchen. The hinges squeaked, and the gate came open with a rumble. It almost seemed as if my mother must know! We pulled it to behind us in a hurry, and stepped out into the world. We held each other tight.

It was very different on the other side of the wall from our side. There were no flowers there, and no vines. There was a street with small, mean

houses, and great piles of clam shells, and a goat or two running about at a distance, and some very dirty ducks going home in single file. Away down the square there was a great red building, with smoke pouring out of its many chimneys, and here and there walking about the street, and standing at the doors, were the black people — not black in any true sense of the word, but grimed with the smut of those who labor in iron works.

It was a dreadful place. We stood outside the gate, flattened against the fence, looking into the street, and afraid to venture any farther.

Almost, however, in the first moment we found a friend. She was quite a small woman, with an anxious expression, and she gazed at us in a hungry way. She had an old plaid shawl drawn loosely over her head, and a little bundle of shoe-strings dangled from her hand.

She had the prettiest, brightest red cheeks that I had ever seen, and her hair was a wonderful yellow color, like a doll's. But somehow there was something about her that I did not quite like.

She had been walking along the street, but when she saw us she stopped suddenly.

"How do you do, ma'am?" she said. "And how do you do, master?"

We clung together a little tighter, and answered her politely.

"Pretty well, I thank you," we said in a chorus, just as our mother had taught us to do to strangers.

"Would n't you like to take a little walk with me?" she asked, pleasantly. "Just a block or two? To see my house? And my little girl?"

We were not dressed to go visiting. I had on a brown gingham apron to play in, and Dick had on one, too, over

his knickerbockers. I began to tell her about it, but she cut me short.

"As if that mattered!" she cried. "My God! And my baby! Come, dears. Come! My little girl is sick. It would be a Christian charity to come to see her."

She looked at us almost beseechingly.

"Oh, what can I say to get them to come!" she exclaimed, in a piteous fashion.

Dick unclasped my hand and went up to her sturdily.

"I 'm not afraid," he said. "I 'll go with you. Come, sister."

Of course if Dick went I had to go, too, for he was the smaller. I started with a reluctant step.

"That 's the little lady!" the woman cried, exultingly.

Our way lay down the block, and then straight away to the right through a network of dirty lanes where the

houses were crowded together, leaning up against one another as though for support. In some places the rain had dripped from the roofs into sloppy pools on the ground, and the path was rough with fallen bricks and mortar. The woman was very careful of us. She showed us the cleanest way, and when the goats came too near she stood in between them and us, and shooed them off. And, at last, we came to a house, old and battered, with very rickety front steps and windows stuffed with rags; that was her home.

There was a stout woman going up the steps with a pail of soapy water in her hand who stopped to regard us.

"Where did you get them kids, Becky Dean?" she demanded.

"That 's my business," our new friend cried, fiercely.

She seemed to bristle with rage.

"Well, I hope there 's no harm in

it," the other replied, curtly, continuing on her way.

We went up and up three flights of long, shaky steps to a little room under the eaves. It was very dark there, — so dark that at first I did not notice a bed in a dim corner, and a child lying on it looking at us with a pair of beautiful large eyes. She did not say a word, but just lay and looked and looked.

The woman sat down on the bed, and gathered the child to her tenderly.

"See what I've brought you," she said, almost in a whisper, her cheek pressed close against the cheek of the child. "See the nice little lady and gentleman come to play with you. Come to play with my own little Amy. Ain't you pleased with your mama, Amy? Ain't they nice?"

The child lay and looked at us, and, at last, very slowly, she smiled. Dick and I were both very bashful, but we

smiled back at her from where we stood by the side of the bed. The mother seemed greatly relieved. She hunted about under her faded shawl, and brought out some sticks of candy, the kind that taste of peppermint, and have beautiful red streaks that run zigzag around them. She generously gave each of us one, and one to the child. We all sucked in happy unison. But the child soon tired. The stick of candy rolled out of her hand, unregarded, and she lay back upon her mother with a faint, wailing cry.

"Maybe she could play a game, if you know one," the mother urged, anxiously. "Oh, for the love of heaven, think of a game!"

"I know 'Little Sallie Waters,'" Dick declared, speaking for the first time.

So Dick and I played "Little Sallie Waters" together. It was hard work,

there being only two of us, but we went around and around in a solemn circle, and sang the words earnestly, and when we came to the lines,

"Rise, Sallie, rise,
Wipe out your eyes,
Fly to the East,
Fly to the West,
Fly to the very one
That you love best,"

we both kissed little Amy Dean, and she smiled at us again from her mother's arms, where she had been watching us with her great, mysterious, melancholy eyes.

"Sure she 's better," the woman cried, in a tone between laughter and tears. "My own darlint! She 's better! She 's better already! They 've done her more good than the doctor. Sure, she was lonesome for the likes of her own!"

Her face shone. She looked as if she could hug us both from gratitude.

"I 've got a doll at home whose name is Amy," I announced, bashfully, trying to make conversation.

"That you have," the woman agreed, heartily. "And without doubts you 'll be bringing it for my little girl to see."

"I 'll bring her to-morrow," I promised.

"Do you hear that, Amy?" the mother commented, happily.

"And I 've got a horse named Alcibiades," Dick added, in his turn. "He 's got red nostrils and a bushy tail. He prances. Like this."

He gave a spirited portrayal of Alcibiades all around the room, ending with a great whinny of delight.

"Would you let wee Amy take a ride on the pretty horse?" the mother inquired, persuasively.

"Yes," Dick promised, with eager gallantry. "Dozens and dozens of rides."

"See there now!" the woman exclaimed. "Won't my Amy have a grand time playing with the little lady and gentleman!"

The child seemed pleased. She laid one little wasted arm about her mother's neck in a loving way, and stretched out the other to us. I almost thought that she tried to speak. Then she settled back again, and her eyes gazed off far beyond us, through the roof of the mean house, higher and higher, perhaps at greater joys and glories that were to be hers forever.

The woman caught the little form to her quickly.

"Sing something else!" she cried, wildly. "Sing —"

She hesitated a moment, rocking herself to and fro on the edge of the bed with the child in her arms.

"Could n't you sing a hymn?" she whispered. "Could n't you, dears?"

Dick and I knew lots and lots of hymns. We always learned them on Sundays to please our grandmother. We stood closer together, and sang with full hearts, our voices rising up, clearly, shrilly, with childish emphasis:

"There 's a Home for little children,
Above the bright blue sky,
Where Jesus reigns in glory,
A Home of peace and joy;
No home on earth is like it,
Nor can with it compare,
For everyone is happy,
Nor can be happier there."

There was a sound of weeping in the room, but we sang on, earnestly, line after line, just as we had played.

Suddenly a hand was laid on each of our heads, and we looked up to see an old priest standing by us. He motioned for us to be silent, and went on to the corner where the child lay

on the bed with the woman on her knees beside her, her face buried in the tiny dress.

"My daughter?" he said, inquiringly.

The pretty gay head came up with a start. The red cheeks were disfigured with weeping.

"She 's gone, father!" the woman cried.

She dragged herself around, still on her knees, and laid her head against his hand.

"I 've tried so hard to be good, father. Ever since you talked to me I 've tried and I 've tried. You know I have. But it 's no use. No use. Everything goes wrong with me. And now my Amy 's gone!"

She burst into tears again, her words becoming incoherent from grief, and sobbed wildly, her head falling back against the bed.

"Where did these children come from?" the priest demanded, sternly.

She explained through her tears.

"I brought them here for Amy to play with. I thought — You know how they all look down on her here, father. She never had a playmate. I thought if she were happier, if there were little friends of her own age about her, that I might coax her back again, get her to stay with me for awhile. I saw the two children standing at their gate. I only borrowed them. Sure, I did n't mean them any harm."

Her voice broke off again into sobs.

It was Dick who created a diversion at this moment. He had been hunting through his pockets, and now he brought out all his precious things, — the knob off the machine drawer, the stopper of the cologne bottle, the ten missionary cents that were to educate the native child in India, even the Waterbury

watch, — and laid them in a little pile on the bed. He pulled the old priest's hand to attract his attention.

"They 're for her," he explained, with a nod at the bed.

He half touched the watch, and drew his hand away again.

"To keep," he persisted, bravely. "Tell her not to cry. Oh, tell her not to cry!"

But the woman cried only the harder.

The old priest took us home very carefully, down the rickety steps, and through the dirty courts and lanes, straight to the Green Door. All the ferocious-looking black men whom we met stopped to speak to him, and he ordered them about, with an air of authority, like so many small children. On the way he asked us many questions, and I confided the whole story to him, of how little brother Dick had been naughty, and had eaten the ginger-

bread and had been disowned, and how we had started out into the wide world together. Somehow I was glad that we had n't gone any farther. Somehow home seemed a nicer place now. It was so quiet and so safe, with pleasant rooms, and a peaceful, sunny garden, and white, comfortable beds, where we slept through the long nights, and kind faces to smile on us, and love to surround us always. I cried a little as I told him about it.

"There is only one home, and one father and mother," the old priest said, seriously. "Remember that. And be good children. The holy grace of God be upon you, my dears."

His kind hands hovered over our heads for a moment.

He took us back into the yard, and locked the Green Door himself, and went into the house to see my mother. He stayed a long, long while.

Afterwards my mother came out into the garden, and kissed us both, with all her old affection. Her face was very gentle, as if she, too, had been crying.

"Where is my little son?" she asked, breathlessly.

But she had her arms around me as well as around Dick.

IX

THE HIDDEN TALENT

IX

THE HIDDEN TALENT

CLOSE in a sheltered corner in our parlor there stood a bookcase. It had two glass doors, and a brass key, and rows and rows of books that looked out invitingly on the world, and seemed to say, "Come, read me." On the bottom shelf of all there were children's books, — "The Child's History of England," "Plutarch's Lives" in brown and gold, a green "Ivanhoe," a red "Alice in Wonderland," and a fat blue book, "The Child's Own Book of Fairy Tales," with rubbed corners, and loose leaves, and a crooked signature on the front page that read, painstakingly, "Rhoda Harcourt." These were my books, my dear,

dear books, and with them comes a memory of hours spent in a window-seat, of dusky evenings when the fire-light lit an absorbing page, and of elderly comment heard over my head.

"How she reads!" my father said, enviously. "I was just like that when I was a boy."

"The child will have no eyes," my grandmother complained.

"She must know them by heart," my mother added.

I did know them pretty thoroughly, but when I tired of old friends I had only to climb up a shelf higher to find new ones. "Japheth in Search of a Father," "The Mill on the Floss," and "Les Miserables," stood just above my head, and there were stories of children in all of these, — the most entrancing stories that opened a window into a glorious golden world of ideality and romance. It was such a wide world!

People did things there. They lived and loved, and when they died the event stamped itself on my mind with a pathos that made me cry from sheer pity.

"I wish Rhoda would n't read so many books," my mother said. "She excites herself over them. She is so different from other children of her age!"

She said it half complainingly and half exultingly. Somehow I knew that my mother liked me to read, and that she liked me to be a little different from other children. Sometimes she bragged about it in a mild way to chance callers.

"Rhoda reads the oddest things," I heard her tell two ladies. "When I was a little girl I liked to read 'The Wide, Wide World,' but she likes novels and histories."

The older visitor glanced at me up in

my corner. It was "Les Miserables" that day, I remember, and their talk played on the surface of my mind while my heart was busy with Cosette.

"Does she go to school?" she asked.

"No," my mother faltered.

The ladies looked at each other.

"What! At her age! Why, who teaches her?" they demanded, in a shocked chorus.

"I do myself — sometimes," my mother answered, still falteringly.

"Take my advice," the visitor with the black eyes said, decisively, "and send that child to school. Why it 's a shame! It is n't fair to the child."

"When she grows up she will regret it," the one with the tight mouth added.

"She is n't strong," my mother explained. "We have kept her at home on that account; but I suppose, yes, I suppose, that she ought to go to school."

She looked at me a moment in a wor-

ried fashion, and then brightened, a trifle of her old pride returning.

"She has the greatest stock of general information," she confided, whisperingly. "She astonishes me sometimes. She does, indeed."

The two ladies shook their heads.

"I don't approve of children knowing too much," the one with the black eyes cried.

"And novels!" the other breathed, evidently appalled.

After they were gone my mother took the book out of my hand, and read a page or two of it in a frightened way. She smoothed my hair, and looked at me anxiously.

"Why do you like this book, Rhoda?" she asked.

"Because it's about a little girl, mother," I answered.

I crept a little closer to her.

"She had n't any mother," I ex-

plained, eagerly. "And a man gave her a beautiful doll, and one night, just think, he put a gold coin in her shoe! She was so surprised! Oh, mother, how I wish I could have been there! I do! I do!"

"Is that all, Rhoda?"

I nodded.

"I have always been a good mother to you, have n't I, Rhoda?"

I rubbed my head against her arm, and kissed her hand.

"At least I 've tried to be!" my mother cried. "And now I am going to do something that perhaps you won't like; but you may understand some day, dear. I am going to put this book back into the bookcase, and I am going to lock the door. It is not to be opened until I give you leave."

"It is n't my fault, is it, mother?" I asked, perplexed.

"No, it is not your fault. It 's only

that I want to keep my little girl just the same in heart and mind as she has always been."

She put the book back on the shelf, and she locked the door; but she did not take away the brass key. She knew and I knew that I would never touch it.

But, oh, how I longed for my dear books! I used to creep to the door and look in at them, and it seemed to me that they appeared lonesome. I finished out the story of Cosette to suit myself, and I made stories likewise for the books which I did not know. There was one remarkable thing about my stories, and that was that nobody ever died; but they all lived happy forever and ever. Even when my mother read the Bible to me on Sunday nights after I was in bed I used to sit up anxiously, and pray her to end the stories in my way.

"Oh, don't let the lions eat poor

Daniel!" I would cry. "Oh, mother, mother, don't let them eat him up!"

"Why it happened centuries ago, dear," my mother answered, half laughing.

"But I can see it," I protested. "I can see it right now!"

It was so hard to see things going wrong, and not to be able to help!

It was about this time that my mother and I did a great many lessons together, and she would offer me odd bits of useful information at unexpected moments.

"Rhoda is not very well grounded," she told my father, "but I do think, Robert, that she knows a great deal for a child of ten."

She was darning stockings as she spoke, and she turned over a very ragged one of Dick's with a little sigh.

"I would like her to go to school. Not to the public school, but to a young ladies' seminary as I did. Don't you

think, Robert, if I were to do without a new winter coat, and we made the old carpet on the stairs last a little longer, that we might send Rhoda to Mrs. Garfield's?"

Her face was brightening as she thought it out.

"And there 's the money in her bank," she cried, "her gold pieces that dad has given her on her birthdays and on Christmas. I don't suppose, Robert, you 'd want dad to pay for it all? He would, willingly."

"No," my father answered.

My mother's face fell, and then lit up again.

"You are a ridiculously proud boy," she declared, fondly. "Well, at any rate, we can save my coat and the carpet."

I wanted to go to school very badly. Every day at half past ten there was a procession past our house of thirty little

girls walking two and two. They all looked happy and important, and I thought how wonderful it might be if I should join their ranks.

Norah, who was always sympathetic, read my fortune in a teacup out in the kitchen that night to see what might be going to happen.

"There 's a change coming to you," she said, mysteriously. "There 's a fair woman, a widdy by the looks of her, and water to cross, and much money. Sure you 'll be gitting so grand that you 'll be forgitting your poor old Norah."

I put my arms around her to reassure her.

"I 'll never forget you, Norah," I promised.

"Won't you then?" she cried, much pleased.

"No. And, Norah, listen! All that I learn I shall teach you myself!"

"Sure there 's a great day coming for both of us," Norah agreed.

I shall never forget that day, the start in the early sunshine, the stiff ruffled apron that I wore, and my mother leading me along the street by the hand. She was just as much excited as I was, and when we came to the door of a large white house, with a brass plate saying, "Mrs. Garfield's Select School for Girls and Young Ladies," she stopped a moment before she rang the bell to rearrange my hair, and give me a private hug.

"Don't forget your seven times!" she whispered, warningly.

I was too far gone for reply, but I nodded, blindly, at her through a mist of tears, unexpected tears, for somehow or other I suddenly seemed to be leaving my old life behind me, and to be going into a strange country.

It was very quiet in the white house.

There were a great many rooms, and a subdued hum of recitation. A clock in the hall ticked loudly. My mother and I sat on two lonely chairs in the reception room and waited. I remember that there was a large piece of white coral on the floor in front of the pierglass. It had exactly thirty-seven points. And there was a motto neatly framed on the wall. "The Good Child Makes the Careful Mother." By and by there was a rustle of silk in the doorway, and Mrs. Garfield was shaking hands with us. She was a fair, pleasant-looking lady. She shook hands with my mother first, and then with me. She gazed at me, very closely and attentively, much as a doctor might gaze, but she had kind eyes and once in awhile her dignity would break into a smile.

"I want to enter my little girl," my mother said, falteringly. "She — she does n't know a great deal."

"Then there 's all the more to learn," Mrs. Garfield encouraged us, brightly.

It seemed to me that she liked to know that I did n't know anything. It seemed to me that she liked to think that I was to be built up after her own plan.

She was busy in a moment asking my age, and getting my school books together. There was a brief farewell with my mother in the hall, during which I clung to her, wildly, then the door had shut and I was alone in the world. It was a dreadful feeling to be alone! And it was still more dreadful when I had followed Mrs. Garfield into a large room filled with pupils seated at their desks, and had been introduced to Miss Lucy, the teacher in charge.

"A little new friend of ours, Miss Lucy," Mrs. Garfield said, in the hush that followed our arrival.

Then she turned and left me.

An elderly lady shook my hand in welcome. She had a soft hand, and a worried look as if something had been going wrong, and there was a little curly-haired girl standing in a far corner, with her face hidden against the wall, who was sobbing bitterly. Somebody had been drawing a picture on the blackboard. It showed a stout man with bow-legs, and an ugly face, and underneath was written "Miss Lucy's Beau."

"You can come out of the corner, Miss Armitage," Miss Lucy said, in an icy tone.

She pointed an accusing finger at the blackboard.

"As for that dreadful — that distinctly unladylike — performance of yours on the blackboard I shall allow it to remain until the noon recess."

The little girls all looked at one another.

"Shan't I rub it right off, Miss

Lucy?" a small person in a long apron demanded, eagerly.

"Oh, teacher, teacher, let me rub it off!" another echoed.

She had bright red hair and a plaid dress.

"No, Cebelia, no, Janet," Miss Lucy replied, more in sorrow than in anger. "We will look at this drawing together. We will consider its disloyalty, its bad perspective, one foot is larger than the other notwithstanding all I have taught her! its *unchristian spirit!*"

She paused for a moment, and seemed to discover me.

"Miss Harcourt, you may take the seat next to Miss Armitage," she added, in haste. "Young ladies, we will go on with the geography lesson."

I followed the little curly-headed girl to a desk, and sat down, and looked at her. And she looked back at me with drowned eyes. She was rather pretty.

Suddenly, somehow, I felt sorry for her, bad as she evidently was. I slipped my hand into hers.

"Don't cry!" I whispered, in compassion. "You dear! Don't cry!"

She pushed up the cover of the desk, and kissed me in its shadow.

"I like you," she whispered, ardently.

"And I like you," I whispered back.

"Let's be friends," she suggested.

We kissed again, solemnly, in agreement.

Up in front the geography class was bounding Asia very eagerly and rapidly. They had all the air of people who had recently escaped from some great peril. We did not pay them much attention for we were too much occupied with each other. Oh, the glory of having a friend, the secrets that we confided that morning behind the desk cover, the horse-hair rings which we exchanged in token of undying affection, the dear human de-

light of finding some one who is your own age, and who loves you!

School lost its terrors for me in a very short while. With Grace Armitage beside me I was willing to dare all things, and when half past ten came I went quite happily hand-in-hand with her in the little procession down the sunny street. It was so odd to look at my home from the outside, to see Norah hanging out the wash, the twins playing in the garden, and even grandmother sewing composedly at a window, just as if it were an ordinary day, and I had not gone to school for the first time. But my mother remembered, and when we passed the door she came running out and waved to me.

After that life resolved itself into a series of school days. Every morning I went gayly off with my books, feeling a new sense of importance, and every afternoon I came running home, with a

budget of news to tell my mother. There were many things to puzzle me in the new world. For instance, I could never understand, why, when the spelling lesson was particularly hard, Janet McLarin would always show a great anxiety to hear about Miss Lucy's childhood.

"Oh, Miss Lucy," she would cry, clasping her hands together, "tell us about when you were a little girl!"

Then there would come a perfect chorus from the whole class.

"Oh, do, Miss Lucy! Do tell us about when you were a little girl!"

"Tell us about the little cloak your mother made out of a shawl," Cebelia would say, invitingly.

Even Grace would add her quota.

"Tell about your mother's party dress, and how she first met your father."

"Yes, yes," the others would clamor. "And tell us about her pink coral beads,

and how they were lost, and *he* found them!"

Then Miss Lucy would close the green spelling book, with a gratified smile, and gather us about her in a little hushed circle, and tell us the tales of a bygone age. I liked Miss Lucy. I liked to sit up close to her and to Grace, and hear about the party dress, and the pink coral beads, and when it all ended happily, as stories should, I would give a great sigh of satisfaction.

"Dear me," Miss Lucy would say, all aglow with enthusiasm, "it's time for recess! Why, where has the morning gone! Well, girls, you'll have to take the same lesson over again for to-morrow."

She was very simple minded, Miss Lucy was, and she understood the situation just as little as I did myself.

Janet McLarin was Scotch, and she

was canny. She could do every sum in the arithmetic; but when the day came for compositions she would put her bright head down in her lap and groan.

"I wish I was dead," she would say, despairingly. "I do! I do!"

Cebelia was more stoical; but she would fold great pleats in her apron, and frown at the blackboard. Miss Lucy always wrote the subjects for the compositions on the blackboard, one under the other, beautifully written out for our decision.

The Story of a Nine-pin.
Thoughts on Spring.
The Triumph of Columbus.
My Mother's Flower Garden.
A Meadow Daisy.
The Beauty of Truth.

They were lovely, lovely subjects! I would sit and look at them in a blissful dream.

One day, the very first composition day, I remember Grace gave me a little shake.

"Which one are you going to take?" she demanded, dolefully.

"I don't know," I answered, with a happy smile.

"Girls," Grace cried, "I believe Rhoda could write them *all!* She likes to write!"

Miss Lucy was out of the room, and I remember that they all came around me, and looked at me, as if I had been a strange animal.

"Rhoda," Janet McLarin cried, taking her head out of her lap, "if you 'll write my composition for me I 'll give you my best blue hair ribbon. My Sunday one. Honest."

I did n't want the hair ribbon; but I nodded at her.

"I 'll write it," I said.

"Will you write me one, Rhoda,

dear?" Grace asked, jealously, with her face against mine. "You are *my* friend, not hers."

"I 'll write yours, too," I agreed.

"And one for me?"

"And for me?"

I nodded at them, generously.

"I 'll write one for everybody," I declared, with a glow of pleasure.

"But don't tell anyone," Janet cautioned.

I could n't understand why she insisted on making a secret of it. It seemed so strange. But I promised to tell no one, not even my own mother.

We always had two days in which to write our compositions. I did ten in that time. I wrote them out roughly on great sheets of wrapping paper. I wrote them up in the garret by the window where the wasps lived, and I had such a grand time that I never noticed the wasps at all; but went on and on finding

something new to say every minute, and loving to say it. Only it was hard when the sentences happened to come out beautifully not to be able to show them to my mother. But I had promised. However, the very best composition of all was to be my own, and that I might show to her. I remember it was on "The Beauty of Truth."

"It 's very nice," my mother said, when it was put in her hand. "It 's — it 's almost like a sermon!"

She looked at the composition, with an odd smile of pleasure, and then she drew me to her and kissed me fondly.

"I think Rhoda would make a fine wife for a minister," I heard her tell my father, excitedly. "She 's got so much natural piety!"

I was very happy that morning as I went to school. I carried my roll of wrapping paper under my arm, and when I reached Mrs. Garfield's I divided

the compositions among the girls, so that they might each copy her own. Afterwards they were all handed up to Miss Lucy and school began.

Miss Lucy took a long time over the compositions. She read them and read them. She looked astonished, and, also, a trifle pleased. At last she gathered them all up in a bundle, and went out of the room. It was very quiet in the room. Every little girl sat at her desk and studied very busily. All except Janet McLarin. She opened the side window and climbed out. The last we could see of her was her bright hair vanishing around the corner with a rush. Then we could hear the sound of Miss Lucy's stout boots coming along the hall, and a swish of silk beside her.

"She 's bringing Mrs. Garfield!" Grace whispered, horror-stricken.

Up to that time I had not been frightened, for there was nothing to be fright-

ened about; but fear is contagious, and somehow I began to be scared myself.

Mrs. Garfield stood up in front of us with a roll of papers in her hand.

"Young ladies," she began, "I have something very serious to say to you, something which it gives me great pain to say. Your compositions have come in this morning, and your teacher has been surprised at them. She has referred the matter to me. I in my turn have been surprised."

She paused. The room was very, very still.

"I find myself driven to the conclusion that not one of these compositions has been written by a member of this class. They have been written by somebody else. They have been written by an outsider. I demand to know who has written them."

I felt very funny inside my breast. My eyes were full of tears. I looked at

Mrs. Garfield standing up there, very severe, and somewhat angry, and at Miss Lucy beside her, with a bewildered expression. I looked at rows of pale little girls at their desks. I looked at Grace. Oh, it was cruel, cruel! They had never told me that I was doing wrong. I had loved them so, and given them my best, and they had all betrayed me! Even Grace! Then I thought of "The Beauty of Truth." I rose up from my seat.

"I did it, Mrs. Garfield," I confessed, brokenly. "I wrote them myself."

Then I cried, my heart breaking inside of me.

There was a rustle at the next desk.

"It is n't Rhoda's fault," Grace's voice exclaimed. "She wrote them, but we asked her to. We are all bad, just as bad as she is. And Janet McLarin who has gone out of the window is the worst of us all!"

If fear is contagious, so is confession. There was a perfect storm of tearful explanations and excuses. They all told Mrs. Garfield how it had been done, and they showed her the wrapping paper. One little girl offered me a piece of chewing gum quite openly to comfort me, and Miss Lucy dried my eyes on her own pocket-handkerchief.

All that Mrs. Garfield said was, "Well!"

But she said it with an air of astonishment.

Afterwards she called me into her own private sanctum, the place where people went to be scolded, and felt the bumps on my forehead.

"Child," she said, "you have great originality. The region of sublimity is large. So is that of humor. I predict a future for you. I do, indeed. Do you understand what I mean?"

"No, ma'am," I answered, timidly.

"I mean that some day you will write greater things than these wrapping paper compositions. I mean that with hard work, hard work, mind you, you may write books. You may become an *authoress!*"

She shook hands with me quite seriously when I went away as though with an equal. The next moment she called me back, and kissed me, holding me close to her silk breast.

"You have talent, dear child," she said. "I will develop it. I will watch over you. Some day there will be books!"

I went home very bewildered, but very happy. I looked at the worn places on the stair carpet almost tenderly. I laid my cheek against my mother's old winter coat hanging up in the hall. Suppose the fortune which Norah had read in the teacup should come true! Suppose that *I* should be the one to buy the

new things, to make soft the narrow life, to reimburse the dear ones who gave and gave and never thought of the sacrifice. Just suppose! It was as if a great white door had opened before me.